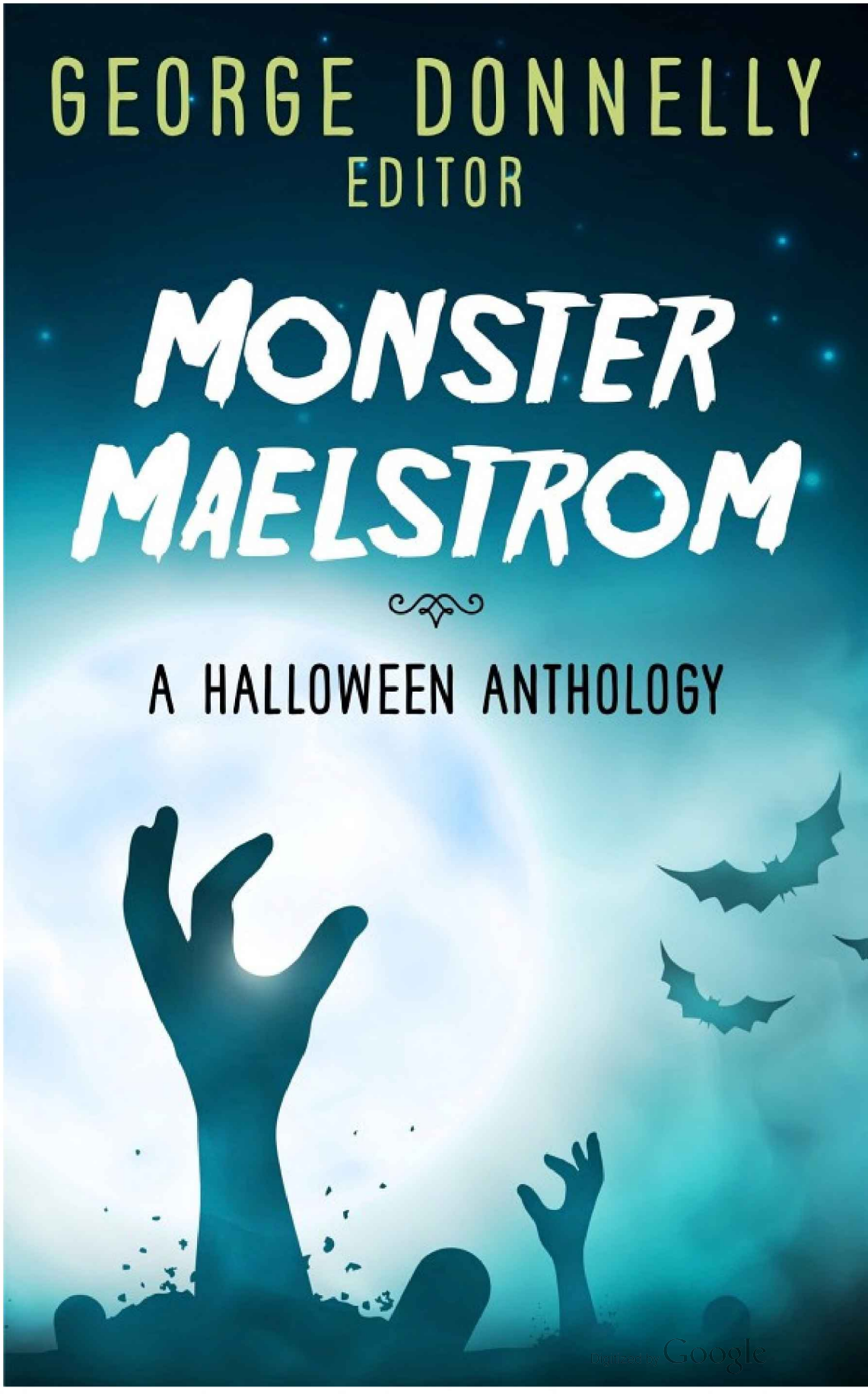
GEORGE DONNELLY

EDITOR

MONSTER MAELSTROM

A HALLOWEEN ANTHOLOGY



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MONSTER MAELSTROM

A FLASH FICTION HALLOWEEN ANTHOLOGY

GEORGE DONNELLY, EDITOR

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To indie authors: the agile, ingenious and brilliant writers of the 21st century

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PART I

HUMOR

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1

ALL THAT GLITTERS ISN'T GOLD

N. D. IVERSON - HUMOR

"No touching the girls," the beefy security guard said after placing a stern hand on Gerald's shoulder.

Gerald threw his offending hands in the air. "We're all good here, man. Right, Crissy?" He winked at the stripper in his lap. She gave Gerald a skeptical glance before turning to Big Bob and nodding.

Big Bob stabbed a finger right into Gerald's face. "If I have to come back here, *man.* You ain't gonna like what happens next."

The music was so loud that a man couldn't hear his cell phone go off (which, of course, was the point) but somehow a scream reached their little pow-wow.

Big Bob's back went straight.

"You should probably attend to that, yeah?" Gerald said hoping the bouncer would let him get back to his lap dance.

Big Bob took off to the VIP area to investigate and Crissy resumed her wriggling in his lap. He was enjoying the friction until Big Bob came dashing back through the VIP velvet curtain with a stripper on his back. *Oh sure,* they *can touch the girls,* Gerald thought. Crissy bolted from his lap almost taking out *his* VIP (very important penis).

As Crissy fled, Gerald yelled after her, "Hey, that wasn't twenty minutes!" He would've complained, but the DJ was also the manager, and if his playlist was any indication, he would be an ear-bleedingly terrible manager.

Gerald focused his attention on the spectacle that was causing a

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bunch of laps to go un-danced. Big Bob was not giving the glitter coated stripper a piggy-back, as Gerald once thought. No, Big Bob was trying to dislodge the stripper like his clothes were on fire and her an oil stained rag. In his attempt to get the feral stripper off of him, Big Bob stumbled into a set of table and chairs before he fell to the ground, forcing the occupants to flee and leave behind their plate of buffet chicken wings.

Probably a smart choice, Gerald thought. Last time he ate the food here, he ended up with DEFCON-Chipotle level of diarrhea.

Big Bob rolled over so that he was on top of the stripper, then violently ripped away from her by rolling to the left. She was still moving, but didn't bother to get up as she was busy noshing on something. Big Bob shot to his feet despite his larger stature. His hand flew to the back of his neck and now *he* screamed. Sensing something gross, Gerald moved in closer for a peek. There was a chunk of Big Bob's neck fat missing and Gerald had a sick hunch that the stripper was gnawing on a piece of fresh Big Bob Jerky.

"The bitch bit me!" Big Bob bellowed, confirming Gerald's suspicion.

As if offended by his language, the stripper rolled herself over and hobbled to a standing position. Everyone stood still waiting to see what she would do next. Her eyes darted around like a kid at Disneyland, unsure of where to start first. Her mouth was a gash of red from Big Bob's blood and her skin had taken on a waxy hue under the top layer of glitter. She looked like she was sick—really sick—not just the "herpes acting up again" type of sick.

Another stripper dressed like a sexy Hillary Clinton slowly walked up to the wild-eyed, bloody stripper. "Angel, you okay?" she asked timidly.

Angel whirled around and launched herself at the sexy Hillary Clinton stripper who screamed like a banshee. That was when everyone decided it was time to leave, as this party foul was too much even for the sad, lonely men willing to throw their paychecks at naked girls for a moment of their time. *Hey, I'm one of those guys,* Gerald thought before he too started towards the exit. Now that people were leaving, the front door was wide open letting the light in like a beacon.

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Gerald and the others spilled out into the parking lot, momentarily disoriented by the blinding sunlight. Gerald was forced to dive onto the pavement as some asshole tried to take him out with their Corolla in attempt to get out of the parking lot. All was calm when Gerald had entered the Tasty Biscuit (the name was rather misleading, giving pet owners a startle when they would wander in looking for dog food). But now it was chaos. Car horns were blaring, sirens were going off, helicopters were zooming overhead, and most alarmingly, there were a pair of girl scouts trying to sell their cookies in the strip club parking lot.

"Get out of here!" Gerald yelled at the two kids.

They screamed in unison when they saw Angel go after one of the regulars after following the crowd out into the parking lot. Gerald let out a scream too. Angel was not near as hot as she had seemed inside the dark club. Even if she wasn't currently covered in blood and gristle—and glitter. Gerald couldn't believe the difference sunlight made. He wouldn't be buying anymore dances from her.

The two girl scouts had abandoned their table of cookies and were already running down the sidewalk. Gerald ran to his F-150 and jumped into the front seat. The truck started and as he was about to back up, something slammed into the passenger side door. He may have peed himself a little, but he would never admit it. The door opened and Crissy threw herself into the cab, slamming the door behind her.

"Holy shit!" she yelled far too loud for such a tiny space.

Gerald looked at her. At least she was still hot out in the daylight. "You okay?"

She sucked in her lips and nodded. "We need to get out of here!"

On a normal day, leaving the club with a stripper would've been legendary, but not when they were fleeing from the horror scene inside. Gerald reversed just as Angel threw herself on the hood of the truck, coating the windshield in spit and blood. Crissy screamed and in a state of panic, Gerald floored the gas pedal sending Angel rolling to the pavement as they reversed going twenty miles an hour.

Gerald turned on the wipers, smearing the bodily fluids into thin streaks. Neither he nor Crissy commented on it. Angel had gotten herself up, paying no mind to the bone now jutting out of her forearm.

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“Oh God,” Crissy said into the back of her hand.

Gerald put the truck in drive and joined the rest of the survivors trying to make it into the steady flow of traffic. They drove for what seemed like hours, but had only been a few minutes.

“What are we going to do?”

“I have no idea. All I know is—” Gerald did a completely inappropriate air pump with his fist— “I don’t have to go to work tomorrow!”

N. D. Iverson is a young-ish author trying to find her spot in the world. She'd love to write full-time, but until she starts to write more, she has to work terrible hours at a place where if she died right now, it would take her a full week to realize she was in hell and not at work anymore. Find her books and get on her mailing list at ndiverson.weebly.com.

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2

OH, MY DARLING

JALETA CLEGG - HUMOR

I slammed my pick into the wall of the cavern, the one hidden in a crack on a forsaken mountainside deep in the craggy Blues. Old Codger Martin told me about the gold there, man to man over whiskey in the back of an old saloon south of Frisco. I hopped a mule and rode on up to check it out and stake a claim. So far, all I'd found was quartz. I hit the wall again. Rocks tumbled to the ground. A gleam of yellowish metal caught my eye. Maybe Codger wasn't a two-headed lying snake. I crouched, my fingers reaching.

The cavern shook. Cave-in? It shook again. Dust shifted down onto my head. The shaking came once more, like a giant stomping his way up from the depths to confront me. Rocks creaked. I thought about running for the exit, but that promising rock had my attention. I palmed it to hide the metallic luster as the steps approached.

“What you doing, hu-man?”

A thunderous voice snapped over me, shaking more dust loose. It was deeper than the pits of hell itself. Might have come from there, too. Who knew where the other end of this cavern led? I rose to my feet and faced the denizen of the depths.

The creature was huge, covered in green scaly skin with giant tusks poking from his fat lips and enormous claws on his hands. He sported a twisted crown of dead rats.

Just a cave troll, nothing too spectacular, not like the dragon that ate Jim Balforth and his entire effete exploration expedition. Their fault for

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tramping into the dragon's front room and smoking those vile cheroots.

“This my cave.” The troll thumped a massive fist onto the floor. “Posted mine.” He flung his other hand out, pointing deeper into the cave. “You trespassing.”

“Now that's where you're wrong, my good troll.” I extended my hand. “Name's Barnabus Whittle. I've filed a legal claim to this section of mountain, but I don't see why we can't work this together.” Everything I knew about trolls ran quickly through my head. It didn't take long. Trolls were a secretive bunch, according to Brim and Bartel, the accepted authorities on cave dwellers. Their entry on trolls included a warning to avoid them and not much else.

The troll shook his head. A dead rat bounced over one eye. “I file claim. My caves. Posted no trespassing, down there.” He pointed into the darkness of the cave.

“I posted up there,” I said, pointing to the entrance I'd blasted just last week. “There must be a way we can work this out. Let's think about this for a moment, shall we?”

The troll furrowed his brow. I took the chance and risked a peek at my rock sample. Gold! Not fool's gold, either, though some might call me a fool for stealing a troll's claim.

“That mine,” the troll said, reaching for my stone.

I took one look at the claws and let him have the rock.

He used one claw to delicately scrape the metal out as if it were putty. He smiled, showing his impressive tusks, as he flicked gold to the ground. “Now it valuable.” He showed me the mass of quartz crystals.

“That?” I wrinkled my brow. “Yes, I see. Most valuable. Well, this is a dilemma. Tell you what, I'll give you half of all those that I find, plus I'll clean up all this garbage for you.” I nudged the nuggets of gold littering the ground.

The troll narrowed his eyes. “What I do? Why I not keep all?”

“I need you to smash the rocks open. I'll extract the crystals. Sure as my name's Barnabus Whittle, I've got a patent pending on the best crystal extractor you've ever seen. We'll be partners. Partners help each other. And share. We can be partners, can't we? Both of us get rich.”

The troll thought for a long moment, then nodded. “But one

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condition."

I smiled my best smile. I was about to become rich and all it cost me was the worthless quartz marring my gold. "Name it."

"Got daughter. Clementine. You marry." Troll showed me his tusks again. "Or I smash you face."

I swallowed. Marry a troll? I eyed the gold on the ground. How bad could it be? I shook the troll's paw. "You got yourself a deal, partner."

CLEMENTINE WAS as sweet as a daisy, although her face could curdle milk. She was a troll, green skin, giant feet, tusks, and all, but since she didn't wear rats on her head and preferred a good calico for her dresses, we got along just fine. She took to the miner's wife role like a natural. She lived in my ramshackle little cabin where she baked cornbread and brewed moonshine to her heart's content. After the first taste of her cooking, I didn't mind that she outweighed any prize bull and could probably wrestle it into the dust. Her food was divine.

She planted a garden, tended it lovingly. Most of it was weeds, but I wasn't about to tell my darling bride that. She was happy and she made me happy. I was the luckiest man alive. Of course, the steady stream of fist-sized gold nugget "trash" her father kept handing me only made her green warts more attractive.

I bought Clementine a dozen ducklings for her birthday. She squealed with excitement. The little birds cowered in terror. She cradled them gently in her massive hands, her claws delicately stroking their downy feathers. By the end of summer, they were a sight to see. Clementine trundled at the front, giant feet in their box shoes stomping down the path to the mill pond below my cabin. The ducks waddled behind, quacking and bossing everything else out of their way. Every morning, Clementine took them to the pond for a swim. I followed, carrying my sack of gold nuggets to hand off to the assayer who set up shop with the miller. Neither of them ever said much about my green-skinned beauty, not after she punched a moose that threatened her ducklings. We all enjoyed the meat from that bounty.

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I was late, that August morning. I arrived at the mill just in time to see Clementine trip over a log. She tumbled into the mill pond with a tremendous splash. Ducks and water went flying. I ran to the shore, expecting to see my bride rise from the depths. Her face did rise briefly, lips pursed as she sucked in air.

Trolls are made of stone, it's embedded in their flesh. Clementine didn't stand a chance. I threw myself into the pond but I was no swimmer. I splashed mightily, thrashing about as I reached for her. I shouted for help, but no one heard over the creaking of the mill wheel.

I watched her sink beneath the water. Her ruby lips blew a last stream of bubbles.

The ducks circled me, quacking as I struggled for the shore. I'd lost my Clementine. My heart would never mend.

Her father waited for me at the cavern when I returned. With heavy heart I told my green friend what had happened to his daughter. I even cried.

He grunted when I finished my tale of woe.

“She good daughter. She happy with you.” He smacked me on the back hard enough that I bounced off the wall. “She got sister, though.” He lifted one eyebrow suggestively.

Clementine had been a marvelous wife. How could her sister possibly compare? “Does she cook? Human food, I mean.”

He grimaced. “All time. Nasty. Breads, cakes, pies, all that garbage.”

My mouth watered. “My friend, nothing can ever replace your daughter Clementine in my heart, but I think I might have room for her sister in there, too.” I shook his gnarled paw, accepting the bargain. The giant gold nugget he handed me didn't hurt, either. I'd marry all of his daughters, and their cousins, and their friends, if he kept gifting me his garbage gold.

I'd loved Clementine. She was better than I deserved. I'd think of my troll bride fondly every time I hauled a sack of gold to the mill or lifted a glass of moonshine to her memory.

“Oh, my darling Clementine, thou are lost and gone forever. Dreadful sorry, Clementine. But your sister, Rosemary, makes apple pie that men would gladly die for.”

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JALETA CLEGG THINKS monsters are a lot of fun. She'd rather play with them than normal people, but since she can't find any under her bed or in her closet, she has to imagine them there. She enjoys twisting expectations in her writing, submitting sweet romances for scary anthologies or scary stories for romance anthologies. She writes science fiction adventure, high fantasy, steampunk fairies, silly horror, and pretty much anything else that catches her fancy. Find her books and get on her mailing list at jaletac.com.

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3

SKIN DEEP

J. NAOMI AY - HUMOR

Lester had no clue what to do with his life until he was well into his twenty-second year.

"Get a job," his mother snapped every morning, before Lester even climbed out of his basement bed.

"I will," he mumbled, usually after his mother had slammed the door, her footsteps already stomping up the stairs.

For a few more moments, he'd lay there, listening to the sound of the washing machine across the room, the hiss of the hot water heater as it flamed and boiled. Sometimes, if he was not too sleepy, Lester would accompany these sounds with his voice, singing a tune that he usually made up on the spot.

In the kitchen above, Lester's mother would give pause to listen to her son's yet undiscovered and amazingly magnificent tenor. Often, the glasses would tremble upon the shelves, as Lester's vibrato resonated throughout the house.

"It's such a pity," she would mutter, stacking the dishwasher full of coffee cups, an unbidden tear threatening at her eye. "He's so talented, and yet, so useless. This life is so unfair."

SOMETIME DURING THE MID-MORNING, Lester would rouse himself, and with a wave of his hand, he'd tell his mother he was off to find that elusive

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job.

Ten minutes later, Lester was seated at his usual table down the street in the coffee shop with the mermaid logo on the front door. There, he'd spend the rest of the morning, and sometimes well into the mid-afternoon, sipping a double mocha venti brew, and observing people.

Silently, he noted their mannerisms, the inflection of their voices, and the way their eyes regarded each other. All this, he locked in his brain, closeting it away for a future time, and for a purpose that as of yet, was unknown.

Midday, Lester returned home, laden with false promises of soon to be acquired jobs, before skipping down to the basement where he studied his bug collection, his pride and joy. Since his earliest memory, Lester had loved insects, especially exoskeleton types. Mosquitos, spiders, and even common house flies were his pets. They all had names. They all had histories, albeit made up.

Lester's favorite, by far, was Robert, a mosquito who would settle in his ear at night, singing the young man to sleep with the whine of his tiny wings.

THE DEFINING MOMENT in Lester's life came on the occasion of his mother's birthday, when she requested the young man's presence at a performance of Othello.

"What's that?" Lester asked, barely moving his eyes from his insect collection.

"Shakespeare," his mother said, as if Lester should know of such a thing. "Put that away and come with me."

Begrudgingly, Lester complied, and to his great surprise, the show was transforming, enlightening, and altogether life-altering for the young man. Even after returning home, in fact, well into the next day, Lester was still weeping with Othello's pain as if it were his own.

It was then that he realized his true life calling was to perform, to evoke these same passions, these same joys in someone else.

"I am an actor," he announced the next morning in a deep theatrical

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voice, as his mother boiled his breakfast egg and burnt his toast.

"That you are," the poor put-upon woman agreed, sniffing loudly and sighing at the same time. "Every day you pretend to look for a job, but it's just a show."

"Today, I will find work. Today, I know exactly what to do."

Fortified and fueled, Lester headed out the door in search of a theatre company and parts to play. Unfortunately, in his town, his country, and in fact, upon his entire planet, acting was considered a '*profession non grata.*'

Lester was not deterred. He was determined to realize his dream. While sitting at a bus stop, he spied an advert that could not be anything less than a sign from above.

"*Join the Galactic Service Organization,*" it read, above the picture of a chorus of costumed dancers. "Entertain the troops and serve. We need you."

"That's it!" Lester declared, bolting to his feet, much to the consternation of the old man sharing his bench. "I'm going to join the GSO. I'll travel across the galaxy spreading joy through my song."

"More likely you'll spread fear and disgust," his elderly neighbor snorted. "Have you looked in the mirror lately, kid? You're a Praepostero. Your outsides are in and your insides are out. You look like a monster."

SIX MONTHS LATER, Lester was so excited, his outsides were positively quivering as he stood before the stage door of the GSO theatre company on Spacebase 37-B. During the intervening months, he had prepared, memorizing every musical in the book, reciting Shakespeare, learning tap dance, and honing his voice enough so he was cast in the chorus of the outer space version of *Oklahoma.*

Destiny was calling him. The future portended something bright. In fact, Lester was certain to become a star unlike any the galaxy had ever seen. The only issue that remained was how to overcome his hideous looks, how to ensure that the audience became blind to his grossness.

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"Okay, I'm ready," he told himself. "I've made it this far. I can go in." Reaching for the knob, he pulled the stage door open.

Unfortunately for Lester, and for Cordelia, the leading lady of the show, who coincidentally, was about to exit from other side, the door swung outward with far greater speed and force than the Praepostero expected. Lester was knocked off his feet, falling upon his bag and the buckle which held it shut. The pointed latch struck and pierced his virtually unprotected kidney.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Cordelia gasped, hearing the thump and seeing the blood spill all over the stage floor.

Although Cordelia wasn't a particularly large woman, Lester's exposed organs simply couldn't bear the addition of her weight, when she collapsed upon him in a faint.

WHILE LESTER RECUPERATED in the base's hospital, an amazingly quick process, equivalent to putting a Bandaid on one's skin, Robert, his pet mosquito devised a plan. Being a rare type of alien insect, he reproduced faster than the speed of light. Within twenty-four hours, the entire cast of *Oklahoma* was covered in red, oozing welts, and itchy boils.

However, and as with any theatre company, the show must go on, especially with an entire spacebase waiting to be entertained.

"Stop complaining!" Mr. Gorf, the director shouted, his twenty fingernails dragging bloody tracks across his skin. "We're going to put on a show tonight, if it's the last thing we do."

"But, we can't!" the cast wept and moaned dramatically, because, after all, they were actors.

Fortunately, at just that moment the door opened again to admit a completely recuperated Lester.

"I can still do the show," he offered. "How about it, Mr. Gorf?"

Having no other choice, the director agreed, assigning Lester every single part.

The Praepostero had it all memorized, including every song, and so with a modicum of blocking, rehearsal and costuming, he was ready to

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perform.

AFTER THE SHOW, Lester was alone in the cast dressing room when Cordelia walked in, her face blistered and crusty, covered in mosquito bites. When she spied herself in the mirror, a scream erupted from her throat.

"Oh god. I look hideous. I'm a monster!"

"No, you're beautiful!" Lester replied, leaping to his feet, thinking she looked better than before.

"Lester!" Cordelia snapped, backing away, her hands raised. "Please, I came for my sweater." She pointed at a chair with a pink flowered cardigan draped over the back.

Lester had seen it and known it was hers. While alone, he had touched it, stroking the nylon fibers as if they were her hair. He had been hoping she'd come to get it. He had been hoping they'd get this chance to talk, and to fall in love, even though it seemed preposterous.

"Please, my sweater," Cordy begged, hugging her arms tightly to her chest.

The Praepostero held out the cardigan, disappointed and yet, unsurprised, a heavy sigh escaping from his inside-out lips.

"The show was good," Cordelia muttered, feeling a tiny note of sadness in her soul, offering Lester the only thing she had to give.

Lester nodded. It seemed so irrelevant now. Without love, what was the point of anything?

"Cordelia!" he cried. "Do you think there might be a chance?"

"What?" Cordelia raised her eyes, seeing Lester as he truly was, a skeleton, muscles, tissues, veins, an inside-out body, albeit with amazing talent. "Um. No. Not at all."

The door slammed shut behind her. Lester's head dropped as his heart fell, while Robert settled back in his ear.

"I guess this is how it is," the young man whispered, to which the mosquito seemed to respond.

"Don't worry, Lester. You've still got me."

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NAOMI RESIDES in the north Olympic Peninsula and loves to dream of space adventures while her dog sleeps under her desk. She is the author of two epic scifi/fantasy series, the sixteen volume Two Moons of Rehnor *series and the six volume* Firesetter *series. Find her books and get on her mailing list at JNaomiAy.com.*

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4

TEDDY BEAR DEFENDERS

TOM GERMANN - HUMOR

More of them were coming. Hideous misshapen black blobs that looked like horrible caricatures of clowns. Big noses over huge mouths full of gigantic razor-sharp teeth. Their arms were grotesquely bulging with huge muscles and too many joints. There were no real hands at the end of those arms, just collections of spikes. There must have been thirty or more in this wave.

They came rushing forward, silently spreading out just a bit, but they couldn't help but start bunching up as they saw the lone figure standing ahead of them blocking their way.

Grr brought his two-handed sword around into a basic guard position and took a deep breath. He pulled the sword back and started rushing forward, roaring as he went. Just before he hit the main group, he flicked his one wrist and the small buckler attached to his arm shifted into a more comfortable position.

He threw his entire body into the swing of the sword, turning almost completely around in the process. Everything that the sword touched was smashed in two. Clown after clown was torn apart.

As the clowns were mutilated, the bodies fell and they started dissolving back into the strange stinking darkness that they all seemed to be made from.

His berserker charge ended; Grr had cut his way through the heart of the clowns. Almost half of them were down and dissolving, their charge broken. The rest turned toward the warrior that had stopped. His

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breathing sounded like the bellows of an ancient forge. Grr adjusted his helmet and buckler again.

The enemy was not smart enough to run through and head for their final target. All they saw was one lone defender, winded and looking like an easy target. Even though many of their number were down, they focused on the defender. All they saw was something to lash out at.

As one, they turned away from the exit and faced the defender. They didn't even regroup. They simply charged.

Then they were destroyed.

As they started running toward the lone warrior who had brought his sword up, a flash came from the side.

It moved faster than the eye could see behind the evil creatures.

A leg came off here, a head went flying there, and then several were just cut in half by a fast-moving shadow of death.

By the time the clowns had reached Grr, as many had been cut down by the blur of motion as Grr himself had destroyed.

Time seemed to pause for a second and then a sultry voice called out. "Ohhhh, poor little baby clowns, having such a hard time with one warrior and a cat? Maybe you should have brought more friends."

The remaining clowns stopped and looked to the side, noticing for the first time the cat standing there. Her fur was a fine grey and her eyes were green. The katana in her paws was long and razor-sharp, and with a few deft moves she had it sweeping through the air with a fine whistling.

Her smile exposed pointed teeth and there was no real warmth expressed toward the creatures that were preparing to attack her now.

"You see, Grr? I told you that if you just charged into the middle of them, they would follow you back in and then we could finish them off. Little Susie never needs to even have a hint that these weaklings were here."

Grr took another deep breath. The bear warrior with his Viking helm and massive sword did not look impressed. "Of course they're stupid. They are darkness and fear. Yet attacking as I did, I stopped a third of them like a true warrior. Your skulking ways have no honour."

Kitty laughed, which seemed to enrage the clowns. "I am not here for honour. Neither are you. We are here to defend the cuddler and stop this

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vileness. *Like so*!"

Kitty thrust her one arm out and silver darts seemed to fly. The thrown blades hit four of the clowns and then both she and Grr charged.

Seconds later, the last of the clowns was down and dissolving away to nothingness.

Grr looked around, gripping his sword tight. "This should have been the last wave of attackers. By the stuffer. Do the parents of Susan not understand that clowns are the stuff of nightmares? Eeesh." He shuddered as he turned and started walking toward the distant opening.

Kitty followed.

After they exited the underbed, Kitty frowned and then touched Grr's arm. When he stopped, she stepped around his side and carefully flicked a bit of smelly dark matter off of his back, then she carefully adjusted his harness. She stepped back to admire her handiwork and then shook a single long, curving nail at Grr in admonishment.

"Do not think for a moment that you are going to climb back into that crib with Susan looking anything other than your best. The child loves you, and a warrior must look their best for those that they protect. You are the shining symbol of nobility for her."

Grr sheepishly kicked the floor with his toe. "Thank you, Kitty."

Then he looked at her more carefully. "But what about you? She loves you too, but you do not seem jealous of the attention she gives me."

Kitty turned, moving with the speed of lightning, her outflung arm throwing another small silver dart. The small clown creature pulling itself up the side of the crib was sliced almost in half. It slipped and fell to the floor below, where it dissolved.

Kitty turned back to Grr, sheathed her katana, pulled out her small elaborate fan, and flicked it open, fanning herself delicately.

"Grr, she hugs me and purrs so loudly it drowns out any jealousy that I could have of any other stuffed animal. She loves me. That is enough. I am, after all, Ninja. I operate in the shadows. We will keep our cuddler safe. Her parents, as silly as they are, will be bringing more guardians soon enough."

Both guardians carefully climbed up the side of the crib, careful to

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stay out of the view of the video camera that Daddy had set up, climbed onto the mattress, and, moving like ghosts, they crept up next to Susan, who was sleeping peacefully.

Grr frowned at the child sleeping on her stomach and, gesturing at Kitty, they both carefully levered her over onto her side.

Grr snuggled down behind her and sighed contentedly. Kitty went prone in front of Susan and made sure that she was facing her.

A small hand came up and clutched Kitty to her and the delicate stuffed animal smiled at the feeling of love while the clock chimed twelve and Halloween ended for another year.

TOM IS A DAD, Husband, Reservist, Realtor and Author. Life does NOT get much busier with all of that! Make sure to follow and find out more of what is coming down the pipe! Find his books and get on his mailing list at TomGermannAuthor.com.

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5

THE REAL MONSTER

J. DAVID CORE - HUMOR

Lucifer opened his eyes for the first time that day. Well, his name wasn't Lucifer. In fact, he had yet to be named. He was just one of the heavenly-host who was created on that day by a lonely God who had become self-aware an unknowable length-of-time ago. This God had grown weary of building his heaven and his hell, and He was ready for companions to share it all with.

The first thing God did after creating the angels was share his plans with them. Their primary duty, he told them, was to worship and adore him. Beyond that, they'd each be given a specific task for which they would be responsible. Lucifer learned that his task was to be the bringer of light, and it was in honor of this task that he was then named.

God also let them know that he would be performing experiments with some of them, giving them unproven qualities such as free will and desire to see how things might play out before moving on to His bigger project: creating Earth and populating it with humankind.

Lucifer, and the other seraphim, cherubim, etc., took this information in stride. After all, they'd been created as non-autonomous companions with no agency or self-awareness. They had no instincts or desires. Theirs was not to reason why. Theirs was but to do and do and do — forever.

Finally came the day that God had promised. He assembled the archangels, and the Nephilim, and the Elohim, and he told them he was about to create the earth. Unfortunately, the assembled celestials just

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stared at him blankly, having yet to receive any of the experimental gifts. So God, who was disappointed in their reaction — to put it mildly — waved his hand and graced them all with the characteristic of anticipation.

Suddenly Lucifer was overcome with rapturous joy at the thought that he was present for such a momentous occasion. When — oh when — would this miracle occur? The wait was mercifully brief. God tilted his deific head, grunted for effect, and suddenly the formless earth lay before them. But this got no reaction other than more anticipation from the gathered host — which for all appearances may as well have been disappointment — for what is anticipation without celebration? "Is that it?" was what the creator saw on their angelic faces.

Instantly God (being God) realized his error and gave the collective the gamut of emotional capacity. This was — as one might imagine — quite a shock to their neophyte systems. Immediately they began jostling. Michael pulled his sword and began waving it about. Gabriel became disoriented and began parroting everything God was shouting in an effort to calm the heavens. But Lucifer just took it all in. He was fascinated by this response to the confusion wrought by emotion.

Then he heard God call for light. This was Lucifer's job, and he was determined to accomplish it. He splashed the sky with blazing luminescence… and then he saw her. She was a vision of absolute beauty and he wanted her. For the first time, Lucifer realized he was capable of desire, and lust, and even love.

God went on with His work, making trees and giraffes as the other angels and what-not oohed and awed. But Lucifer had another distraction. He made his way through the crowd and introduced himself to this wondrous creature. "Hi," he said in words that don't really translate. "I'm Lucifer."

She dropped her head and glanced side-eyed and demure. "I'm Lilith," she said. "God made me to be the mate of man."

"What's man?" Lucifer asked.

"I guess we're about to find out," Lilith said pointing as God gathered a handful of mud and shaped it into a bizarre homunculus which he breathed on and placed in a garden as it stirred to life.

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From there, things went to crap. Lilith rejected Adam (though he claimed it was the other way round) and Lucifer led an insurrection on her behalf. God recognized that giving the creatures He made free will had been a mistake; so He took it away from the angels, but let mankind keep theirs until they'd had to reboot everything three times. Then He tweaked the system so that free will was kept in check by something called pre-determinism.

Lucifer spent a little time in a new gig as something called Satan where he did God's dirty work, but eventually he grew tired of that and he and Lilith and the kids moved out of heaven and took the place next door. They say good fences make good neighbors, but the firmament was leaky and kind of transparent, so Lucifer and Lilith could actually see what was going on in heaven from their front porch; and all they could see was God being judgey with the leftover sycophants sitting at His feet. It was disgusting to see, so they tried to spend as much time as possible on vacation in a place called Washington DC.

But all-things-being-unequal, Lucifer had little to complain about. He had his distractions: planning Armageddon and helping blues musicians get record deals, and stuff. But then he watched as history began to repeat itself. These people God had made had actually advanced to the point where they had created automatons of their own, and some were trying to imbue these machines with personalities. and emotional response, and even self-awareness. But unlike in his day, now there were automatic weapons and nukes.

It was all over, and there was nothing for him left to do but to sit back and await the inevitable. Sure eternity was going to suck; but when people finally realized that all of it: the global warming, the race wars, poverty, cancer, sitcoms … it had all been God's plan the whole time, he'd be vindicated, and everyone would know who the real monster had been all along.

WITH A PROFOUND INTEREST IN RELIGION, liberal politics and humor, Dave began writing in High School and has not given up on it since. His first professional writing jobs came while attending the Art Institute of

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Pittsburgh when he was hired to create political cartoons for the Pitt News *& to write humor pieces for* Smile Magazine. *Dave has worked in the newspaper industry as a photographer, in the online publishing industry as a weekly contributor to* Streetmail.com, *and was a contributing writer to the* Buzz On *series of informational books and to the Western online anthology,* Elbow Creek. *Dave's science fiction novel,* Synthetic Blood and Mixed Emotions, *is available from WriteWordsInc. Dave currently resides in his childhood home in Toronto, OH with his beautiful girlfriend and his teenage daughter. He enjoys participating in local community events & visiting with his two adult children and his grandkids. Find his books and get on his mailing list at lupamysteries.blogspot.com.*

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6

WHAT I DID AT HALLOWEEN

EDWARD M. GRANT - HUMOR

The man stood on the doorstep in the cool evening air. As the orange sun sank behind the houses across the street, the glowing plastic pumpkin lights that Daddy had hung from the patio for Halloween reflected from the drizzling rain that tapped on the man's wide, black umbrella, then dripped down onto his arms from the tips of the metal frame, soaking the cuffs of his cheap grey suit.

Bubbly music floated along the hallway from the living room. Kaitlyn had left the *Happy Unicorn* DVD playing on the TV when she rushed to the door with her pink, fluffy princess dress flapping around her legs, after he interrupted her with his constant banging. Now his dark eyes stared down at her as she held the door open.

"Hello, little girl. What's your name?"

Don't talk to strangers, Mummy had said. But the way he smiled at her, he didn't feel like a stranger. He looked like a nice man. A friendly man. A man she could trust.

"Kaitlyn."

"Can I speak to mummy or daddy?"

"They went shopping. To get more chocolate and crisps for tonight."

"And left you alone?"

Kaitlyn sneezed, and rubbed her nose on the arm of her dress. "I got sniffles, and Daddy said I'm old enough to stay home and sneeze by myself."

"Then perhaps you can help me instead. I buy gold and jewels. Do

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your mummy and daddy have any?"

Kaitlyn bit her lip. Should she tell him?

No, of course not. Mummy and Daddy would tell her off.

But, the more he smiled that big, wide smile at her, and the more his gaze bore into her eyes, the more she wanted to.

He pushed against the door, and Kaitlyn stepped back as it opened wider. "I could tell you how much it's worth, so they'll have a nice surprise when they get home." He looked through the living room door, at the cartoon playing on the TV. "Maybe they'd buy you a pony."

"A white one?"

"Whatever colour you want."

That did it. She glanced toward the stairs. "Mummy has some shiny stuff in her bedroom."

She closed the door after he passed her, and followed him upstairs. He peered through the door into her bedroom, and at her crayoned unicorn drawings on the wall above the bed. Then stepped into her parents' room at the end of the landing.

The plastic sheet covering the carpet crunched beneath his feet. "What's that for?"

"To stop it getting messy."

He glanced toward the jewellery box on the shelf. "Is that where your mummy keeps her gold?"

Kaitlyn nodded. He grabbed the box and opened it, then lifted out a chain that sparkled in his hand. "Nice. Very nice."

"Is it worth a pony?"

He picked up a ring, gold with inlaid diamonds. "I think they could be. Why don't you make me a nice cup of tea while I value these?"

Kaitlyn smiled, quietly closed the door, and slid her fingers around the key. The lock clunked as she turned it, and he looked up as she pulled the key out and clasped it in her hand.

"What are you doing?"

"Bob says you robbed Mrs Doolittle's house while she made you tea."

"Who's Bob?"

"Bob's my very best friend."

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“You shouldn’t be friends with liars.”

“Bob says you're here to rob us.”

He held out his hand. “Come on, give me the key.”

“Bob says you're an asshole.”

And Bob was right, too. That big, friendly smile became a scowl, the man’s forehead grew red, and his eyes bulged.

He motioned with his fingers. “Give it to me, before I have to smack you, for being a naughty little girl.”

She tossed the key toward him. He lunged for it, but it passed an inch from his fingertips, and clinked as it banged off the window frame before it flew through the open window.

“Oops.”

“What the fuck did you do that for?”

He barged past her, and twisted the door handle, then banged on the door. It rattled against the lock, but stayed shut.

“Bob will get the key when you're done.”

“Done what?”

“Done…” What was that word? “Repenting.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“He said you have to give back what you stole.”

“If I had stolen anything, why would I do that?”

She squinted at him, and scowled her nastiest scowl. Much nastier than his. She’d been practising it all day.

“If you don’t, Bob will eat your brain.”

“You're not a nice little girl, are you?”

She pouted. “I'm very nice.” Then she shook her head and frowned. “But Bob's not so nice.” She leaned closer. “Bob’s not nice at all.”

He crossed to the window and leaned out, looking down. Bob said it was too high to jump without breaking something. He turned away, returned to the door, and smacked his shoulder into it. The door shook, and the lock creaked.

“Mummy will tell me off if you break the door.”

He grabbed Kaitlyn, and wrapped his fingers around her neck. His face glowed red. “You're lucky I don't kill you.”

“Bob wouldn't like that.”

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“And where's Bob?”

She looked toward the bed, and smiled. The man’s brow furrowed, then he released her. He tossed back the quilt and found nothing beneath, then crouched by the bed, and peered into the darkness below it.

Something long and thin flicked out, and wrapped around his neck. Big teeth flashed in the darkness. He screamed and jumped to his feet as Bob's tentacles wrapped around his head, and Bob’s long, curved teeth bit into his nose.

“THEN BOB'S t-tentacles popped out the man's eyes, and he screamed and screamed and screamed as Bob shoved a tenacal into each ear, then pulled and pulled and pulled until his head went pop!”

“Kaitlyn, that's enough,” Miss Morgan said.

Kaitlyn looked up from the scrawl in her exercise book. Most of the other girls in the classroom were grimacing, while the boys laughed and nudged each other, or scribbled pictures of heads wrapped in tentacles on the covers of their exercise books. Or their desks.

Miss Morgan just scowled as she grabbed Kaitlyn’s arm, and pulled her to the corner of the classroom.

“Did you really write that?” Miss Morgan whispered.

Should she admit it? Kaitlyn stared into Mrs Morgan’s eyes. They bulged from her head the way they always did when she was sure someone had cheated on their homework.

Kaitlyn looked down. She'd only get in more trouble if she lied. “Bob did the long words.”

Miss Morgan pushed her toward the door. “Headmaster's office. Now. And I’ll be speaking to your parents.”

EDWARD M. GRANT is a physicist and software developer turned SF and horror writer. He lives in the frozen wastes of Canada, but was born in England, where he wrote for a science and technology magazine and worked on numerous indie movies in and around London. He has

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travelled the world, been a VIP at several space shuttle launches, survived earthquakes and a tsunami, climbed Mt Fuji, assisted the search for the MH370 airliner, and visits nuclear explosion sites as a hobby. Find his books and get on his mailing list at EdwardMGrant.com.

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7

TEDDY BEARS AND A GOOD COP

TOM GERMANN - HUMOR

"Pour me another one, Jim."

The bartender at the far end of the bar came over and poured another out of my bottle. Jim knew that I came in every night and what I drank. Everyone in the bar knew me. I was that cop. No one ever hassled me; they knew what I had done, and what I still did. They could also see what it was doing to me. Then again, everyone also knew my temper. It had been on television, after all.

And none of them blamed me for what I did.

Jim gave me the eyeball as he poured my drink. He was clearly considering something. Then he poured out a triple instead of my normal shot. He tried having the conversation with me.

"Hey Billy, you look like you could use this." He paused. "You got that look. It was that bad case, wasn't it?"

There was a bubble of empty space around me. No one would pop that. They were scared to.

I'm not supposed to talk about this, but it was almost eleven and it would be all over the news. And Jim is a way better therapist than the department shrink.

I just looked back at him with my blank face. Crying would make it worse for everyone. "Yeah, it's that case. The kid made it and should be okay. The three guys that took him, though… they didn't make it. I was the one who found the house and went in. They tried it on me. At least, two of them did. They didn't walk away from that one."

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Jim cocked his head and his eyes had a gleam in them. He has three grand kids and is kinda like me. You don't hurt kids. "You said two of them tried it on you. Glad to hear they got what was coming to them. What happened to the third guy?" Then he almost did a double take and he smiled, nodding at my chest. "New mascot for you?"

I patted my chest pocket. Standing there still was a small stuffed bear that just fit inside. I tried to smile back, but it came out more as a grimace. "Yeah, Jim, you could say a mascot. Friends sort of gave him to me. He's called Comfy." Before Jim could say anything, I kept going. I needed to distract him from the bad stuff. "That last guy was found all cut up in the basement. The official line is that the three of them had a falling out and took the last guy out. Not the way it happened. They thought he was in the basement having fun with the kid when I got there. Something else sliced him up."

Jim just nodded and overlooked my 'something' comment. "Well, I don't know what it is about the world today. It seems like every scumbag out there is coming to our city to live now. They all seem to think that they can come here and do what they want. Each and every one of them is a monster, Bill. You gotta remember that. You are not guilty. They are."

I looked down at the drink in front of me and then picked it up, slamming it back in one shot. I put the empty down upside down on the napkin.

"Thanks, Jim. I think that'll be it tonight. I've been told to get off the sauce. I've got to get back into a car so I can do more."

I dropped some bills on the counter and then waved at Jim and the rest of the patrons as I left. Most waved back. They recognized me. In a sick way, some looked up to me.

I was supposed to be a hero. But I felt more like a monster.

When I returned home, I entered the front door of the small post-war bungalow and turned the light on. The light was pale and didn't do much to eliminate the darkness in the living room.

I kicked my shoes off—my mother had taught me well—and walked through to the kitchen where I drank a glass of water. There was a forty-pounder of cheap Scotch on the counter. I considered it, then passed on

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it. I needed to cut back. I would be no good to the kids if I was completely hammered.

My contacts had told me about what was happening in the city. I shuddered, I had to try to be strong. I knew it was going to fail, though.

I passed through the tiny dining room with its small table. The teddy bear sitting at the head of the table made me shrug.

In my bedroom I laid out my clothes for the next day. There were two more stuffed animals sitting on his bed, watching me with their gleaming eyes.

I moved back through the kitchen, grabbing my water bottle from the fridge, and then sat down in my favorite recliner in the living room. I had to move the teddy bear from the chair to a couch; it had a scar on its face and seemed to be grinning.

I sat down, set the chair back, and tried to relax. I didn't think it would take long for sleep to claim me. But I just dreaded the dreams. I patted Comfy in his chest pocket.

My eyes closed slowly and I drifted.

My eyes opened. The sun was bright overhead and the park smelled nice. There was a voice behind me.

"Hi Bill, glad you finally joined us."

I turned and saw them standing there. The secret monsters that no one would believe existed.

The stuffed animals were bigger here than they were in my house. There were six of them. No, seven. Comfy came around from behind the others and ran up to me, grabbing onto my leg and hugging for dear life.

The lead animal had a scar on its face and grinned. Its—his—mouth opened and he kept talking.

I no longer felt like I was losing my mind.

"Hey, Bill. I don't know how you can see us. Only the cuddlers—small, loving children—can really see us. But you can see us too. Maybe 'cause you're innocent, or more likely, because you relate to children so well and act as a guardian. I told you the first time I met you. You ain't insane."

He gestured to either side, where the other animals stood quietly, unthreatening.

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"We've stood in defence of the children for an eternity. We protect them from the terrors under their beds. But sometimes we fail or are overrun. Those children grow up and become human night terrors. That is what you are dealing with now. Something about the city, somewhere inside the limits, something is calling them. That's why they are coming this way and you see more of them. The rules are simple. Humans cannot see us and we are not supposed to affect the adult world."

Scar gestured sharply. "Screw that! My little one was taken away from a loving family and me. I could have made a difference! But the rules."

He looked down and rubbed his paws together. Then he looked up at me. For a stuffed animal, he had an expressive face.

"So Bill, I am here breaking the rules with a few others. All the other guardians will talk to us, quietly, where they can't be seen doing it. You have a huge snitch network now that will provide you all the intel on what is going on in the city. And sometimes, when you need us, 'cause you'll fail otherwise… Sometimes I can act. Like that guy in the basement."

I exploded. "You hacked that guy to pieces!" Then I sort of deflated; that little boy had been about to have bad things happen and I wouldn't have been there in time.

Scar shrugged. "Get me an AK and lotsa ammo and I'll make it work. We just agreed we wanted to meet with you. We got your back. Now save those kids."

I woke up with a snap. I felt stiff and irritable in the chair. There was a lump in my side. I pulled Scar out from where he had been pushed into my side. In the early light I could see his grin.

I could smell fresh coffee and toast.

I hadn't put the coffee pot on.

I shivered as I got up and prepared to face the day.

TOM IS A DAD, Husband, Reservist, Realtor and Author. Life does NOT get much busier with all of that! Make sure to follow and find out more of what is coming down the pipe! Find his books and get on his mailing list

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at TomGermannAuthor.com.

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8

MONSTER IN THE ROOM

ALEXA GRAVE - HUMOR

A nice, long, luxurious bath. That's all I can think of as I insert my key into my apartment door lock. And when I say long, I mean three hours at least. Hey, what do you expect? I *am* a sea nymph.

But I realize that's not meant to be when I step into the living room to find it filled, up to the cathedral ceiling, with a monster. I drop my keys.

All I want is to relax after working the strip club's early shift. Fine by me — it's less crowded in the afternoon, which means fewer men ogling my fake goodies. Fake as in illusions, not plastic surgery. My normal seashell-covered breasts don't appeal to most humans, so I have to whip up a little Immortal World magic.

The two nitwit fairies are trick-or-treating with my best not-so-giant giant friend, Syndago. Having those drunken, naked mood killers out of my hair is a rarity.

At least I think they're gone. "Tamor? Tamara? Are you here? Is this *your* monster?" Probably their idea of a joke. "Trying to make your pal Grinka explode a few light bulbs for your entertainment?" My little power of destruction is raring to go, as always. Though the monster's already shattered the ceiling lamp.

The fairies don't know the definition of quiet, so if they're hiding, I'd hear giggling. Nothing. Not even a peep from the monster. But it stares at me with large red eyes. Bloodshot whites match well with the shade of

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its irises.

"So, Mr. Monster. Why exactly are you in my living room?" Guess I should have greeted him when I first walked in. I've been hanging around the fairies too long — they have no manners. And I *think* it's a he. Always hard to tell with monsters. Too much fur. This one's shaggy coat is a lovely shade of olive. Reminds me of barf.

The monster shifts his feet. All ten claws scratch the hardwood and his ample ass knocks the TV off its stand. Great. I just replaced that last week — the fairies destroy at least one a month. He doesn't reply, though.

Rude.

"Hey, buddy, watch the horns. I don't need matching gouges in the ceiling." I wave my hands frantically. "Those maze-like twists you got look wicked." At least they aren't anywhere near me. Even if I can't die, being skewered by a horn hurts like hell. Well, I assume it does. Never had actual experience with that. Came close with a unicorn once, though.

His gaze follows my gestures, but he keeps his silence.

What's up with this idiot? I mean, I don't know a lot of monsters. They're a part of the Immortal World, a world I fled — New York is so much better — but usually they keep to themselves. They're immortal recluses. So why is one in my apartment?

The urge to blow stuff up wanes. It's hard to stay angry when you're facing a monster with claws the size of your head. For once in my pathetic sea nymph existence, I don't feel the need to explode a light bulb. Nope.

Time to admit I'm scared shitless.

I laugh, and even I hear my nerves. "Okay, it was nice meeting you. I have plans, so it's about time you head out." Not like I have any hope the monster will leave just because I ask.

He wiggles his pointy nose, throws his head back, then sneezes, a droplet smacking into my aqua hair. Ew. Now I really need a bath.

"Gesundheit." At least I found my manners.

The monster blinks and wipes his nose with a furry, claw-tipped finger.

Not even a thank you. Hmph.

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But my annoyance is drowned out by a panic pounding in my head. Is his goal to stare me to death? Immortals supposedly can't die, and Syndago's tried almost every way imaginable without success, but I'm getting the creeping feeling this monster holds the secret and will enact it on me at any moment.

Now he's got me thinking crazy. Really? The secret to immortal death? What, is he the Grim Reaper barf-colored monster? I squeak. That sounds too believable right now.

Well, if I'm going to die without being able to share the secret with poor Syndago, I'm not going to go quietly. Not my style. "You're freaking me out, Mr. Monster! Look, if you're going to eat me or whatever you've got going on in that fluffy, horned head of yours, just get it over with. I can't handle any more!"

The monster grins, rows of sharp teeth gleaming. And yes, I mean rows. Like a shark.

Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut.

"Happy Halloween!" he bellows.

I jump, then pat myself to make sure I'm still in my skin.

"This Monster Gram was from Raina. She wishes you a joyful and scary holiday."

He's got the scary right.

The monster leans down and lowers his voice. "Sorry about the snot. I got allergies." Then he rights himself and smiles that sharp-toothed grin again. "If you liked this Monster Gram and would like to hire us, please contact Gravel in the Monster Caves realm. Thank you and have a good day!"

Guess the monsters are coming out of their caves and becoming entrepreneurs. First time for everything.

"Off I go to the next job." He blinks out of existence, the sofa cushions rustling as he disappears. Don't ask me why, but furniture is the preferred way of travel between the Immortal World and this one.

I plop on the floor, trying to get ahold of myself. Hell, I don't even have the energy to explode a light bulb as a reminder of my angry sea nymph status. At least the fairies and Syndago aren't here to see my humiliation. Small favors.

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Raina. My teen sister has an awful sense of humor. I'll make sure to send her a bill for the TV and lamp, but not until after that much needed bath. I have monster snot to wash out of my hair.

Alexa Grave loves to tell stories — it just so happens her characters occasionally take her on an unexpected ride. Most of what she writes is dark fantasy, but she enjoys her attempts at the humorous side of things. It's not odd to find romance within her fantasy as well. Discover her books and get on her mailing list at AlexaGrave.com.

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9

THE REANIMATED REUNION TOUR

CORA BUHLERT - HUMOR

Good evening and welcome, ladies and gentlemen. Tonight only, for a special Halloween performance, we at Necromancy Entertainment Unlimited are pleased to present you a true sensation unlike anything you've ever seen before. For today, we present you… the Undead Tenors.

In life, they were the greatest opera singers of their respective times, some of the most amazing voices ever heard by human ears. And now, for the very first time, they appear together on stage in a reunion tour unlike any other.

So get ready to meet the Undead Tenors.

First, we have Anselmo Colosi, one greatest lyric basso profundos ever. His Osmin and Sarastro were the toast of Salzburg and his Baron Ochs rocked the Vienna opera house. His voice is no longer quite what it was, considering that half his ribcage has rotted away, but his vocal cords are still intact. So give a big hand to… Anselmo Colosi, as he shuffles on stage.

Watch out, Anselmo, you're losing bits of rotting flesh again. And those were brand new shoes.

And here comes Vittorio Davoli, the baritone with the devil's smile and an angel's voice, who played all the great villains and tragic heroes of the Italian opera. His Scarpia stunned the Scala, his Count Luna shocked the Met, his Rigoletto made La Fenice cry. Due to an unfortunate accident involving a guillotine during a production of *Andre*

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Chenier, he has to carry his head under his arm, but his voice is still as wonderful as ever. So let's hear some applause for… Vittorio Davoli.

Careful, Vittorio, you're drooling again. Honestly, how the hell can a severed head drool?

Our next Undead Tenor — and an actual tenor for once — is Sebastian Unterhöllerer, one of the greatest buffo tenors ever to grace the opera and operetta stages of the world. He played Gabriel von Eisenstein in Johann Strauss' classic operetta *The Bat* for ten New Year's Eves straight. He was the handsomest Sigismund of them all at the *White Horse Inn*, his Papageno was a revelation and his Pedrillo stole the show in every production of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* he was in. So let's hear it for… Sebastian Unterhöllerer.

Yes, that's fine, Sebastian. Just stand right next to Anselmo. And no, I don't care if he threatened to garrotte you once. You're both dead — it isn't as if he could kill you again.

And this tall blond — well, at least he used to be blond, but seems he's gone bald in death — gentleman here is Wieland Wohlrabe, once the foremost heroic tenor in the world. He was a regular at Bayreuth and played all the great heroic Wagner roles. He was Siegfried and Siegmund, Tannhäuser and Lohengrin, Tristan and Parzifal. He requested to be buried in his Lohengrin armour and would probably have worn it for tonight's performance, if it hadn't gone rusty while Wieland here was pushing up daisies…

Wait a minute, what? A swan. No, we don't have a swan for you to ride, Wieland. And no, I don't care if you floated onto the scene on a swan at the Bregenz festival once, riding a swan on stage is absurd. Yes, even more absurd than an undead zombie tenor. And if you don't like it, you're free to cancel your contract and go back to being wormfodder.

Where was I? Oh yes, let's have some applause for… Wieland Wohlrabe.

Finally, I'm proud to present you Lionel da Silva, probably the finest lyrical tenor — shut up, Wieland, I said lyrical, not heroic — of all time. He was Belmonte and Tamino, Alfredo and Rodolfo and the loveliest sopranos swooned in his arms, both on stage and off, before expiring of consumption — on stage only, of course. And then later, he expanded his

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career — yes, I said expanded, Vittorio, cause Lionel's career wasn't fading, and anyway, he's not the one who's carrying his head under his arm — and did a rock meets opera tour that sold out in twenty-seven cities worldwide. He rocked stadiums, performed at the Superbowl and the Olympics. So let's hear it for superstar tenor Lionel da Silva.

Yes, I said superstar, cause Lionel is the only name those lowbrow idiots down there in the audience actually know. Or do you think anybody actually listens to Wagner voluntarily, Wieland? And operetta is completely passé, Sebastian. And no, I don't care how often you killed him on stage, Vittorio. You played the villain, so it was your job.

What, you threatened to garrotte Lionel, too? What is it about you and threatening to garrotte people, Anselmo? Oh, that was in your great aria in *The Abduction from the Seraglio*? They write arias about garrotting people now?

That's Mozart, you say? Seems to me Mozart was something of a psychopath then. And anyway, I thought opera was supposed to be highbrow entertainment, not a low-grade horror movie. Yes, I'm aware how ridiculous that sounds coming from someone who's putting a bunch of rotting zombies on stage.

By the way, Anselmo, about that garrotting aria… would you mind singing it on stage later? Cause I'm sure the audience will lap it right up. Just try not to… you know… actually kill someone. Or at least kill them again.

Okay, Wieland, you got me there. I confess I don't actually know anything about opera except what I looked up on *Wikipedia*. I'm just a necromancer trying to make an honest buck here. And anyway, no one really cares about opera these days. What the audience wants is a spectacle, so let's give 'em a spectacle.

Ahem… anyway, ladies and gentlemen, here they are, for the first time ever together on stage. They may look a bit rotten and they may smell a bit ripe, but they've still got it. The greatest voices — if not of our century, then the last — reanimated for your pleasure.

So let's welcome Anselmo Colosi, Vittorio Davoli, Sebastian Unterhöllerer, Wieland Wohlrabe and Lionel de Silva. Together they are… the Undead Tenors.

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Yes, I know that only three of you are actually tenors. It's just a name, okay. And besides, it's not as if any of those proles would know the difference.

Ladies and gentlemen, if you enjoyed tonight's show, I guarantee that you'll love our next program, when we at Necromancy Entertainment Unlimited present you the Undead Divas, the greatest opera divas that ever lived, reanimated for one special posthumous reunion tour.

But for now, here are the Undead Tenors with "Va, pensiero" by the one and only Giuseppe Verdi.

What do you mean, you forgot the lyrics? Dead or not, how the hell can you forget the lyrics? Well, just sing something. I don't care what. After all, it's not as if the audience will know the difference.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, the Undead Tenors with… well, whatever.

Cora Buhlert was born and bred in North Germany, where she still lives today — after time spent in London, Singapore, Rotterdam and Mississippi. Cora holds an MA degree in English from the University of Bremen and is currently working towards her PhD. Cora has been writing, since she was a teenager, and has published stories, articles and poetry in various international magazines. She is the author of the Silencer *series of pulp style thrillers, the* Shattered Empire *space opera series, the* In Love and War *science fiction romance series, the* Helen Shepherd Mysteries *and plenty of standalone stories in multiple genres. When Cora is not writing, she works as a translator and teacher. Find her books and get on her mailing list at CoraBuhlert.com.*

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PART II

HORROR

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10

SHADES OF HELL

ELI NIXON - HORROR

Wanda and McClintock retreated to the wheelhouse, Wanda to monitor the video feeds and McClintock to sneak a plug of whiskey from the paper bag beneath the captain's chair. I was the last person to drop into the water. The newly discovered monument waited beneath the waves. We were the first people to explore it.

I thought of Marianne as I drifted into the tepid, top-lit blues and greens that encroached on the shores of Yonaguni Island. Here, in the first meters of the sea, light and darkness mingled as old friends, parted lovers. Here, in the weightless climes, arcane forces fiddled with perception. The sky was a ceiling of rippled glass at my feet, inverted and disorienting, a barrier between sea and air. The forms of Sven and Meadows, of Amanda, my colleagues, swam in the darkness above me. I was not falling, but rising. Paddling smoothly into a dark sky.

Hell above, heaven below.

And falling from hell, shapes began to appear in the water.

Thump.

The noise startled me from sleep, yanked against the comforting lull of the ship's motions. I listened for it to repeat itself so that I could discern its source, and again came the muffled knock on wood from

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above me, on deck.

Thump.

The sound was familiar, yet the memory of its origin evaded me, slipped away with the tattered remnants of my slumber. Perhaps the others would investigate, I thought, although I heard no searching footsteps, no questioning calls.

I would do it then. As I swung my feet to the rough planking, my dream came back to me, Marianne, young, in university. I remember her in hues; blues and oceanic greens, white skin and dark hair, the dynamic orange of sunsets.

The bunk above me was occupied, I saw, by Sven, so deep in sleep as to appear dead. His arm dangled, rocking with the gentle waves. No, not so as to appear dead. Dead. A chill raked my spine. Blood caked the swinging arm. The creature had come in the night to finish the job. It spared me. Why?

Thump.

The bunk room was brightly lit by a swinging electric lamp bolted to the ceiling. Blood covered my sheets, my own arms. Was it still alive? Unfamiliar with the rocking waves, I stumbled into the stairway beyond, clambered onto deck where the moon shone silver. The air smelled of salt. It dried my throat, clung painfully to my skin.

Captain McClintock lolled on the deck beside the retaining wall, brown paper bag in one hand, fire ax in the other. His detached head rested on the deck astride the ax, single eye gleaming in the moonshine. At the sight, fear overcame me. What had we awoken in the deep? It had followed us to the ship. Damned fools we'd been!

Thump.

I armed myself with McClintock's ax and ventured deeper amidships, one unwilling footstep at a time, shivering at the thought of the horrors ahead. The raised wheelhouse loomed, casting blankets of darkness which yawned to swallow me with black teeth. It was becoming hard to breathe.

Thump.

Was it wounded? Had we managed that much? Was the grotesque beast itself the source of the frantic, muffled pounding? Closer I came,

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stepping into the shadows beneath the wheelhouse… and stumbled over a soft form slick with oil. The ax tumbled from my grip, my hands slipped in the viscous puddle. I crashed down on the hateful form and stared into the wide, terrified eyes, frozen in death, of Reverend Meadows. His hands clutched a wooden crucifix to his chest, his mouth carved into a horrifying grimace.

…and all the shades of Hell are awake before you…

Thump.

My fingers reached desperately for the ax, now bathed in Reverend Meadows's blood. As I was. In our blood, in our guilt. Dear God, what had we done?

Past the shadow of the wheelhouse, the bow deck was a shimmer of silvery light. The creature was not in sight. It was hunting me.

Thump.

I could see now the source of the sound. A long wooden locker on the bow, used for storing gear on the little fishing vessel, shook with each iteration.

"Marianne," I whispered, hissed.

Wanda Everett, who'd organized our scientific expedition, was nailed to the front of the locker with arms outstretched. Crucified. Her torso bent against the deck, legs splayed away from the box. Alive. Her throat rasped a single word, lost to the ocean breeze.

A demon of dark intelligence. It was a trap, designed to lure me into the open. Even now the beast would be slipping around the wheelhouse to catch me from behind. My skin felt dry, scaly in the salty air.

Thump.

Marianne.

At risk of my own death, I had to save her. My footsteps were light across the decking, moving easily now with the rocking of the ship. At my approach, Wanda's eyes widened in fear. The creature! Behind me! I swung, ax raised, to an empty ship.

A thump, and a muffled scream.

Ignoring the old woman's fearful whimpers, I reached for the latch of the wooden locker. Marianne…

No, no this wasn't right. I didn't recognize the young woman in the

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box. That was not my Marianne.

"Please, Ben… please…" the creature in the box whispered.

Putrid beast.

I closed the lid, reengaged the lock. Her whispers turned to screams behind me, fists pounded the wooden lid. This air… it suffocated me. The deep beckoned. Whatever had taken up residence inside me yearned for its home.

For the first time, I took notice of my hand. The skin had become mottled, green. Black claws curved from shrinking fingertips.

With one talon, I slit the throat of the creature nailed to the box, finishing it. My secret was safe. I could sleep again.

I slipped over the railing and swam into the comforting blackness, my own memories already fading as the demon fully became me. A single sound followed my descent, though soon even that faded.

Thump.

Eli Nixon is the author of the sci-fi series Son of Tesla *and the zombie horror series* Heartland Junk. *He has a dark place in his heart for that rare and beautiful mix of horror and sci-fi. Find his books and get on his mailing list at andrewhandley5.wixsite.com.*

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11

MONSTERS LIKE US

JEANETTE RALEIGH - HORROR

The chasm between who I am and who I long to be seems insurmountable.

I am a monster.

Those words don't have the same power to me that they might say, to a human. It's the same as saying, "I'm a meat-eater," to a vegetarian. Even a meat-eater watches the cow-killing videos in horror before their trip to the local burger joint, but the cow must feel a special kind of horror, personal and intense.

It was a Saturday night, dark and full of possibility. I strolled along huge sidewalks made small by the tall steel buildings overshadowing them. At this time of night humans (at least the smart ones) sought shelter while those with a taste for blood hunted.

A young woman, a child to my centuries, with a fresh face and jaunty walk held hands with a fellow whose brains were severely outmatched by his need to show off. She caught my eye and fearfully leaned in to whisper, "We need to get off the street."

He laughed, the poor fool, and said, "All of those videos are fake. It's just a way to scare people into staying home. Come on, we're having an adventure."

"I want to go home." She wasn't petulant or childish when she spoke. If anything, it was an honest request brought on by an intelligence that scanned her surroundings and saw…danger.

Me.

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I'm the shadow that threatens their cozy existence. She was right to fear me.

She leaned in and I saw her finger pointing my way.

He ignored her and said, "Come on. We just got here. We have to see the bridge. You can't chicken out now."

With reluctance, she walked with her boyfriend. They were holding hands. It was sweet, like watching a pair of lambs gambol in a field. That didn't make the lamb chops any less tasty when put on the dinner table, but they were cute, nonetheless.

I stalked them to the bridge. My hunting grounds crossed those of a half dozen other night terrors who lived in the cities feeding off of humanity. Urban legend said that anyone who saw the bridge at night would die. Urban legend wasn't far off the mark.

"Terry, pay attention," He tugged on her hand a bit.

She was sensitive, that one. Her eyes roamed the nooks and crannies, the shadowy corners of the buildings looking for me. My gift left me ten feet in the air, watching from the balcony of an Italian bistro that closed promptly at nine.

"There's something out there," she said. She pulled her hand out of his and turned, searching for the danger she knew existed. "I want to go back."

He smirked at her, the pompous, arrogant smile of a guy who knows too much at eighteen. I wanted to slurp that grin off his face. When he mocked Terry's fear, I felt sorry for her.

"I'm going back to the car." Terry walked away from her boyfriend, thinking he would follow.

With a shrug, he called her back and handed her the keys and continued on his path toward the bridge. I briefly wondered if the vampires had awakened yet. I am not a vampire. My species aren't well-known and don't have a name. Yes, we drink blood, but we aren't the fiction favorite known for showmanship or false declarations of love.

We hardly registered in the shock videos people post, most of which are discounted with the same vehemence as a UFO video. It amuses me that people assume monsters are incapable of using technology. It has been my observation that the predator has a higher intelligence than the

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prey, but that may be personal bias.

The young woman watched her boyfriend walk away. Terry. My meal had a name. She straightened her shoulders and turned, her eyes frantically scanning every shadow for a monster. I let her pass my hiding place. Her shoulders tightened, just a fraction, but I could see her fear, and then as if she felt me watching, she ran.

Again, I followed across deserted streets until she turned into the parking garage. Glancing over her shoulder, Terry searched for me. I know she could feel me and suffered that cold, clammy fear knowing with base instinct that some shadowy creature watched her.

I almost let her go. I nearly turned back to hunt her boyfriend. It was the right thing to do, to reward Terry and punish the boyfriend for leaving her alone, but I am neither parent nor teacher, and I seldom do the right thing.

I let my form shift into the dark mist of my kind. You've heard of the hag that sits on a person's chest and drinks their essence while they sleep? That hag is a distant cousin, an offshoot monster who lets her prey live.

Sinking into the parking garage, I found Terry unlocking the door with shaking hands. She smelled like adrenaline. She smelled like pure fear.

With a sigh, I drew closer. She smelled so good. She tasted better.

Climbing into the car, she closed the door with a sigh of relief and locked it up tight. I let the mist of my being sink through the roof of the car, surrounding her and drowning her in her own terror.

I killed her with the same cold satisfaction of a thirty-year old woman biting into a cheeseburger and groaning with pleasure. With her last drop of blood drained, I lifted away, a shadowy darkness with no remorse.

I let the wind blow me away from the city into the suburbs where I would sleep.

I am a meat-eater. I am a monster.

As I said, the chasm seems nearly insurmountable.

JEANETTE RALEIGH IS NOT A VEGETARIAN, but can empathize with the cows she

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loves to eat. For a gripping tale about four Elemental sisters, try Elemental Rage: A Time to Kill. *Find her books and get on her mailing list at jeanetteraleigh.wordpress.com.*

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12

HERO

GEORGE DONNELLY - ZOMBIE HORROR

I am their hero. I feed them when they're hungry. I clothe them when they're cold. I kill the beasts when they threaten them.

Maria and Josh, that is. My wife and baby boy. The loves of my life.

A beast's fingers clawed at the blacktop where I dropped him before. I drew and turned those digits into zeros.

Bastard monsters. We had a life. Not this one. Before.

Green lawns, children squealing, fruit salad on the deck and a quickie before work. I did things then, meaningful work. I employed thousands and healed millions.

I had to move them. I kicked a rotten liver out of my way and took up watch with my back to them. I'll die in this last stand. I'll die before letting—

No.

Now I was an animal not unlike these monsters, products of the corporation I founded. The fountainhead of all my good fortune turned to a cistern of decomposing shit with razor claws and chomping teeth, hungry for me and mine. All because I trusted the wrong man.

The beasts rustled and scratched both from the north and the south. Ahead of me, rusting cars piled up between us and Lake Michigan to the east, the buildings of downtown Chicago I once admired from my seventy-sixth floor now a funnel that concentrated the stinking hungry hordes.

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Behind me—

No.

A beast stumbled around the corner between a blown out bus and a fire-blackened hatchback.

"When will you stop! What must you take from me? What do you want?"

More poured over the Jeep and Tesla I'd arranged as a makeshift wall on the other side. Leering, lidless eyes, flapping rags smeared with liquefied organs. The stench assulted my nose, a choking miasma. My heart thumped in my throat and my mouth went dry.

It happened just like this the day I flew her on my Gulfstream to Paris with that question on my mind. My throat closed and my tongue stopped working at the critical moment.

But she said "Yes" before I could get the words out. That's Maria. Knows what I want before I can put it into words. The perfect team. That's what we were.

A mass of the sick bastards turned the corner off of Michigan Avenue from the south and stumble-sprinted toward me. A small group from the north merged into them.

I had to move them. I turned. But...

No.

I snatched the detonator off of my belt, twisted it and prepared to plunge carbon fiber steel into the ignition switch.

Maria and Josh moved behind me, their plastic parkas scraping and crackling.

"Just be still. Just wait!"

The hordes converged and became one all-biting, all-screaming mass, their bulging eyes universally on me, hungry, aching, consuming me in their twisted minds' eyes.

The first ones passed the lines. My hand twitched, dirty, nails uncut, not unlike those of the beasts. Hold, man. Hold, if ever there was a time to exercise patience it was now.

Maria groaned behind me. I felt their fear, despite the—

I slammed my hands together like a single clap, the last applauding I might ever do for this world, in appreciation not just for Maria's soul-

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love but also in grudging admiration for the ingenious depths of hopelessness that stalked me at every step.

The line of grenades exploded as one, the shockwave throwing body parts and blood into the air like the spray of an ocean wave, wrecking everything ahead of it, cleaning, clearing and preparing the way for new life.

The shrapnel came next, razoring through the rotten flesh, clinking into the skyscraper steel and catching in the oozing August blacktop.

I reached into my back pocket for my handkerchief and wiped their filth from me.

Far away, more of the beasts rumbled, like a distant thunderstorm. They'd be here soon and I had nothing now but my Glock 23 and a half-dozen Hornady rounds we'd scavenged from a rotting cop.

The world grew clearer. The air turned crisper and each rise of my lungs lasted an eternity.

It was time to decide.

"You have to choose. We can save the mother or the baby. Not both."

The doctor's words burned in my mind like the funeral pyres that were the cities after the outbreak. But even that decision hardly compared to this one. Then, at least, I was guaranteed one of them. Now... I turned.

No.

The hordes assembled again, hungrier this time, arms outstretched, sprinting, teeth mashing.

Maria and Josh are my everything. But this was different now. This was about me. I can't do— not like— But not alone. Not without—

I wanted the world to end. Again. This time for me, too.

But what if there was something else? What if I was needed? What if there was still some respite to be had?

I turned.

Josh crawled in slow-motion, his baby-blue cotton hoodie blood-soaked, his eyes white.

Maria lay next to him, her womb cooking on the hot cement, the smell... I mustn’t forget that smell. It’s all I had left.

I burned the image into my mind. I wanted to remember the cost of

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failure. The cost of my screwup, the only one that mattered. I wanted it to hurt. The pain must never end.

Because I was their hero. And then I failed them.

My Glock shook. I exposed Josh's brain to the cruel summer air. I did the same for Maria.

I stepped over them, and moved on.

George Donnelly is the author of space opera, robot apocalypse and dystopian science fiction series. A rebel and unreformed idealist, he believes equally in human rights and abundant hugs before bedtime. Get a new free short story every month at GeorgeDonnelly.com.

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13

MONSTERS ARE EVERYWHERE

JOHN D. OTTINI - HORROR

I finish applying makeup and I stare out of my bedroom window at the street below. It's Halloween night and the neighborhood ghosts and ghouls are just beginning to hit the streets.

I hear a soft knock on my bedroom door as it opens.

"Hey Dad. What's up?"

My Father stares at me and says, "Aren't you getting a bit too old to be trick or treating?"

"Actually, I'm dressing up for Johnny Finn's Halloween party. I told Mom about it last week."

The look on my Father's face tells me this is news to him.

"Anyway, your Mother and I are going to New York City for a mini-vacation and the Kennedys have offered to look in on you while we're away."

"I'm fifteen Dad! I don't need anyone looking in on me." *Especially Mr. Kennedy.*

"We'd feel a lot better if the Kennedys kept an eye on you and besides, you're not as old as you think."

"Seriously, Dad. You joined the military when you were sixteen."

"That was different."

"How was that different?"

"Those where different times, son."

"Different times?"

"Back when I was your age, we didn't have the crime we have today.

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There weren't murderers, rapists and pedophiles on the news every night. We didn't have monsters lurking around every street corner."

"You're exaggerating, Dad."

"I don't think so, Pete."

"Well, what about Sara? Why can't she look in on me?"

"Your sister's away at college. You can't expect her to drive back just to watch you? What's up between you and Mr. Kennedy? Ever since you walked out on Boy Scouts two years ago—"

I raise my hand in defeat and say, "Never mind, Dad." *You wouldn't believe me anyway.*

He gives me a confused look. "I don't understand you, Peter. Mr. Kennedy and I go back many years, we were in the military together, he's your godfather, he's my best friend—"

I cut him off abruptly. "I know Dad. I've heard the story a hundred times... I get it!"

"Don't get smart with me, young man."

"Oh, so now I'm a man!"

My Father gives me a stern look and shakes his finger in my face. "That petulant attitude won't get you anywhere! I came here to tell you that the Kennedys are going to keep an eye on you while we're gone. Subject closed. Discussion over!" He slams the door and leaves.

The subject was never up for discussion and it's definitely not closed. Not yet, anyway.

I take one last glance at my zombie costume in the mirror and reach under my shirt to feel the cold metal against my skin. "Dad was wrong. I do have one last Trick left in me."

Before leaving the house, Mom intercepts me at the front door.

"Why must you always upset your father?" She says with a defiant look on her face.

"Why do you always take his side?"

"He's my husband—"

"I'm your son, damn it!"

My burst of anger catches her by surprise and she almost spills her drink. "Watch your mouth, young man. I see what's going on here."

"I swear, you're as bad as Dad. You only see what you want to see."

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“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I shake my head and say, “Nothing. I’m late for the party. I gotta go.”

I waste no time walking across the street to the Kennedys' house. I ring the doorbell and my nightmare appears, dressed in his scout uniform.

He smiles at me and says, “Hello Pete. It looks like you and I are going to be spending some quality time together.” Then he laughs and reaches down the front of his pants. “Your old friend misses you.”

“Treat or Trick?” *You sick bastard.*

“Ooh, you know how much he loves your treats. What do you have for him tonight?” He says wiggling the front of his pants..

“Treat it is, Mr. K.”

I hesitate for just a moment. Then in one clumsy motion, I pull my Dad’s gun from under my shirt and point it in the direction of Mr. Kennedy’s face. My hands are shaking like crazy, but I manage to pull the trigger and the shot strikes him in the forehead.

I hear Mrs. Kennedy’s terrified scream just before I drop the gun and I run back towards my house.

Dad meets me in the driveway and asks. “What the hell was that?”

“Mr. Kennedy seems to have lost his head.” I reply with a weird and wicked laugh.

“What? I thought you were going to the Finns' house?”

“You changed my mind.”

He grabs my shoulders and begins shaking me. “You’re not making any sense.”

“I shot Mr. Kennedy.”

An incredulous look crosses his face. “Why in the world would you do something like that?”

Tears stream down my cheeks. “One less monster on the streets, Dad.”

John D. Ottini currently resides in Central Florida with his wife and a mischievous kitty named Bella. Find his books and get on his mailing list at jdonovels.wordpress.com.

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14

HOUNDS

HEATHER BIEDERMANN - HORROR

"Right on time." The woman with the silver hair and shining blue eyes opened the heavy wooden door.

Jake Kincaide smiled easily as he stepped inside. The large stone house was nestled in a dark forgotten woods. The nearest neighbor had to be over ten miles away, and the whole property was surrounded by a large stone fence. He was lucky the directions were so good, or he never would have found the gate, an ivy-draped entry that seemed intentionally easy to miss. "Glad to meet you, Mrs. Rochester," he said and shook her tiny delicate hand.

"Oh, please call me Mina," the woman said warmly.

The house was brightly lit with soft furnishings and happy pictures of children playing on the walls. There were Halloween jack-o'-lanterns decorating tables. A pie was baking somewhere and Jake felt instantly at home. An unusual painting of a woman whose face was half skeletal blue and half beautiful pink skin was on the wall. Mina saw Jake looking at the painting and she started to explain it's meaning.

"That is the goddess Hel," Mina said.

"Like Hell and the Devil?!" Jake asked.

She sighed and shook her head. "No, like Hel, from the Norse stories. H-E-L. She rules the underworld."

Jake shrugged and tried to fake appreciation. He honestly didn't care at all about history and trite ancient religions.

"May I take your coat? Would you like a beverage?" she asked.

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“Oh, nothing to drink for me.” He slipped his coat off his tall frame. “I’m just excited to see the dogs. How about we get to it?”

Mina nodded. “Hounds. Before we see them, I need to ask you a few questions. These animals are very special to me, and I don’t let just anyone come see them. Much less, to find a home for their pups.”

Jake, an agent for the USDA in the Center for Animal Welfare, found the ad on an exotic animals website that was sometimes used by the criminal element looking to sell illegal animals to private buyers. He couldn’t believe this grandma in front of him was a criminal though.

“So, from your post to me, you said that you were looking for special animals to care for?” A faint howl sounded from not too far away.

Jake nodded.

“Good, good,” she continued, “Now tell me, Jake, have you ever cared for big animals? I’m talking maybe the size of a tiger or small bear?”

“I used to work for an educational animal park up in North Dakota, and regularly took care of bears when I was there” *That was a lie.*

“Perfect! Do you have a lot of space for a pair of large animals to run around?”

“I live on a farm about thirty miles from here. Lots of space for animals to run, and a sturdy fence to keep them in,” he said.

She nodded. “That is so important, to keep them safe from outsiders. You also need lots of fresh meat to feed them. This is critical. You are serving a noble cause. These beauties grow quickly and are quite dangerous to outsiders.”

Jake pushed a little more. “How much are you asking for the dogs? I mean, I don’t want to waste your time if I’m in the wrong ballpark.”

“We don’t talk price until after you meet them. You will see what I mean once you do. Are you still interested?”

He nodded, but was starting to feel confused. “But these are dogs? I mean, sure they eat meat, but how much special care do they really need?”

Her face turned serious. “If you get the calling to the hounds, it becomes your purpose in life. The hounds are everything.”

He remembered his ex Tammy had been obsessed with her cats. She

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made up funny voices for the cats and had them say ridiculous things to him. Those little monsters always clawed the hell out of him and dropped decapitated mice in his shoes. No amount of crazy cat lady sex was worth that. He remembered that Tammy always said the cats were everything to her, too. It made his skin crawl.

"Of course, they are everything to me." He lied and put his hand on top of hers. "We are servants to our pets after all."

She obviously heard what she wanted from him and stood up. "The hounds will meet you now, Jake. But I warn you, that they are dazzling to everyone who encounters them. Astounding really. Please try to stay calm. Let them come up to you. If they like you, you will know it immediately. We always say, let the hounds choose their human companions. It works out best for everyone. Do not feel badly if you are not chosen. It doesn't happen for everyone."

They walked down the hall to a large metal door with a complex latch. It was out of place for an old house like this. Mina swung it open and he saw deep scratch marks on the side of the door to the basement. They walked down stone steps, and down another long, brightly lit hallway. At the end was a second metal door, this one dented on the inside as if something had hit it repeatedly. This room had Norse runes all over the walls, although he had no idea what they could mean.

Mina fiddled with the latches and the door opened with a metallic groan. The lights were dim in this room. The illumination from behind them flooded in and suddenly two sets of eyes blinked in the darkest corner of the room.

"Skoll! Hati!" Mina called out. She let out a whistle and the two hounds approached, their claws clicking on the stone floor. What came out of the darkness was more than astonishing. These were no dogs, but instead giant monstrosities. Thick, black, mottled fur covered their bodies. They were each five feet tall and rippling with muscles. Their feet had sharp claws like those of a tiger. Most disconcerting however were their giant yellow fangs and glowing ruby eyes that froze him in place.

Skoll and Hati walked up to Jake and sniffed him. His heart quickened and sweat dripped down his brow. He smiled at them, and

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raised his hand up to their noses. “Good boys. Nice boys.”

The giant hounds sniffed at his hand and his hair and clothes. They panted and relaxed a bit. They sat on the floor and looked up to him.

“I bet they are adorable as puppies.”

“Those are the puppies, Jake. Their parents are out for a run on the grounds,” she said with a smile.

Jake’s head spun thinking about how big the full grown hounds would be.

“They are Vargs. Some call them Wargs or Helhounds,” said Mina.

Helhounds are born here on Earth, also called Midgard. They choose their human protectors and we care for them until they change to their spectral forms and go over the Rainbow Bridge. They then join the the pack, where they live at a place called the Hall of Hounds, which is ruled by the God Loki and his daughter Hel. As a reward for service, all protectors have a home in the afterlife at the Hall with the pack until the end of the world at the time of Ragnarok. It is the ultimate honor for one who loves animals as I do.”

What a nutcase! His eyes darted around the room and stopped at the food trough, where there was a pile of bloody bones. A glint of silver on a pair of shoes in the pile stood out. Out of one of the shoes a bloody leg stump protruded. He gasped and backed away. “What the... Do they eat people?”

Mina nodded. “It’s usually cows, sheep, and chickens. But helhounds happen.”

“No way,” Jake started laughing in disbelief. “These can’t be real. Where are the cameras? This is obviously a joke.”

Jake walked up to one of the Helhounds and started to poke at it, looking for some sort of prosthetics or movie animatronics that would give away the con.

With that, a growling Helhound pounced up and bit off Jake’s probing hand. The other Helhound leaned in and took a chomp out of his leg. Jake fell to the ground sputtering in shock, trying to crawl away.

“Oh, Jake,” said MIna, “I was hopeful that when you saw my babies that you would fall in love too. I guess instead you will just have to be their dinner. This world is really going to the dogs, don’t you think?”

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Mina laughed as she turned to walk out of the room. The door creaked shut and was bolted on the other side. The last thing Jake saw before passing out were two pairs of red glowing eyes leaning in as the yellow fangs began to rip at his flesh.

Heather Biedermann is a Viking librarian and an author of short stories. She is passionate about all things nerdy, travel, reading a good book, and glamping. She lives in Minnesota and is currently completing her first novel. Find her books and get on her mailing list at HeatherBiedermann.com.

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15

ECHOES IN THE ETHER

GEORGE DONNELLY - HORROR

"Stop, please!" Leather cracked against bare flesh once more and I cringed.

"Enough of that." The metal belt buckle clanked to the floor. The father grunted and air burst in a gaping gulp from the boy's mouth.

"Dad, I can't breathe." I tried to guess his age. Not more than twelve, I thought.

"You're shit. You're not qualified to wipe your own ass. You'll never amount to anything. I should just end—"

A sharp knock sounded at the door and Dr. Herzweil sauntered into my office.

I paused the audio stream.

"Jerry? On break again? We're all waiting on you in the staff meeting right now."

"I found it again, boss," I said.

Dr. Herzweil paused in the doorway, his fingerprints fogging the glass window next to it. "I thought I was clear. The voice recordings from our apps are only appropriate for machine learning and analysis. You're breaking our terms right now."

"They agreed to the terms. The app is always listening. That's how the voice search works."

Dr. Herzweil threw up his hands. "Billions of terabytes of recordings and you found just one that… what? What's—"

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"It's child abuse, Ted!" I jumped up from my chair and strode over to him, my chest and gut still aching from last week. "This is a kid, suffering. They are beating on him, with their fists, telling him— They might kill him! This is corporate eavesdropping and what are we doing it for if not to—"

"Delete it. Bury it. Forget about it. And get into the group meeting. Now!"

Somebody screamed. I looked down at my hands. Blood. I pulled chunks of glass from my knuckles and more tinkled to the floor. Dr. Herzweil disappeared.

"LINCOLN PARK and straight down the Kennedy. I'm from Chicago so I know where I'm going."

"Lincoln Park, yes, sir. I take you there, no problem." The cabdriver hit the ignition button and we floated as if on a cloud out of O'Hare and into the midnight traffic. The skyscrapers loomed there above the highway like so many metal monsters — I knew it, but the gloom and the rain kept me from seeing the truth for myself.

My ear buzzed. I answered, and immediately regretted it.

"You're in Chicago and you'd better be coming to see me," Mom screeched.

I searched for the off button. How the hell did she find out?

"I'm waiting up, you know. I'm keeping supper warm in the oven and your father is expecting you tomorrow for Thanksgiving dinner!"

"I'm busy, Mother. And my flight back to SFO is early, so, no."

"Why don't you talk to your father anymore?" she whispered.

"I just don't want—"

"You're breaking our hearts, Gerald." Her voice cracked.

The driver turned up his steel drum music and flew right by the Diversey exit.

"I wanted to get off there!"

"Don't yell! Why do you hate us? We fed you, educated you. We raised you with proper discipline and morals for eighteen years!"

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"Sixteen. I left early. Remember, Mom?"

"You owe us, you nasty little brat. You never would have amounted to a damned thing without us wiping your snotty nose and keeping you on the straight—"

"Take Fullerton!" The cab swerved just ahead of the divider and we jetted down the off-ramp towards a yellow light.

"Mom, this is not a good time—"

"You won't get anywhere without us. You're nothing, you're shit. You think you're so good, don't you? Your little job with your pathetic doctor? We can take that from you anytime we please. So get your rear-end over here, young man, otherwise we'll have another little chat with Teddy Herzweil."

The connection died and I jabbed at the phone controls.

"Hello?" The old man sounded friendly, familiar, too calm.

"Who's this?"

"Gerry? Dr. Herzweil here. I'm worried about you, young man."

"I'm—"

"Come on back, you'll be much safer in our little ivory tower here. Sorry I spoke to your parents but you forced my hand."

"Dr.—"

"See you soon."

The line crackled. "To listen to this message again—"

I RUBBED the two sides of the folded pink post-it against each other in my pocket. I finally had it. Yeah, I lied to the cable company. Told them I was a cop. It's not important. Now just a quick stop and then back to work in Mountain View.

I replayed the audio in my earbuds and hugged my arms tighter to my chest. So much violence in this world, sometimes I wish I could just be someone else, in another city, on another planet with another name.

The icy Chicago wind tore through my pants and licked at my legs. Stupid of me to not bring a jacket but who needs one in California? This was my last time in Chicago. Too many bad memories here.

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I pushed through the police station doors. Heat. The dry air scorched my throat.

"Yes, sir." The police lady narrowed her eyes at me.

I slapped the post-it note onto her high desk. "There is a little boy being abused at this address. You need to do something about it. The parents have threatened to kill him. I was never here." I took a step back.

The woman stood up, her grandmotherly voice holding me. "Wait just a minute, sir."

I tapped my wrist. "I've got a flight, sorry! I did my part. Now you do yours. That little boy is waiting."

"Sir!"

I turned and crashed headfirst into a barrel-chest with a Bears beanie. "Oh, sorry." I stepped to the right and he moved into my path. I laughed, moved left and he blocked me again. "Excuse me!"

The woman appeared next to me, holding the pink note between two rainbow-colored fingernails. "How did you obtain this information, sir? Did you obtain it legally?"

"Just forget I was here!" I jammed my hands into barrel-chest. The exit doors came into view.

Meaty fingers clapped down on my neck and turned me around.

"I know my rights! You can't detain me without probable—"

Barrel-chest tapped his ear. "Hospital gown, bloody hand, dark hair, blue eyes? Yeah, we've got your schizo here. You coming down for him or what?"

The wind whipped through my legs. Too cold. I looked down. Blood caked on my right hand. A blue and white hospital gown flapped above my knees. What the hell?

The grandmotherly cop shoved the post-it note in front of my nose. "2536 North Diversey. Isn't that your address? Where you live with your parents?"

I stared at the note. 2536 Diversey. That's where my parents live.

"Bruises. All over him," someone said from behind me.

"Yeah, about about all these bruises and cuts? Maybe even a cracked rib?" Barrel-chest raised an eyebrow at me. "Did it to himself? Alright. A minor? Okay. His dad's coming for him. Got it. He'll be here."

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A chill ran down my spine and my knees buckled. My dad? No!

George Donnelly is the author of space opera, robot apocalypse and dystopian science fiction series. A rebel and unreformed idealist, he believes equally in human rights and abundant hugs before bedtime. Get a new free short story every month at GeorgeDonnelly.com.

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16

LAST ONE AT THE DOOR

GRIFFIN CARMICHAEL - HORROR

Trick or treaters are so darn cute. Especially the little ones, the ones who can barely walk or are carried in their mother's arms, all dressed up as clowns or pumpkins. Mostly they're in big groups these days, because of the weirdness that some people get up to.

Can't be too careful, as they say.

I'd pretty much given up on having any more callers at my door. It was getting late, so I turned off the porch light and went to settle down for a B movie horror fest. I was looking forward to eating all the leftover candy—full size bars, no skimping this night, at least—and getting in some classic Elvira camp.

I'd just gotten comfortable in my recliner when the bell rang. It was surprising, because not having a light on was a signal that the candy-grabbing event was over for the year.

Grunting, I set aside my glass of soda and the bowl with the candy. I'd gotten half-way to the door before I remembered it.

"Probably should bring that along," I muttered. Darn tardy kids, I just knew it was going to cost me at least a handful of Snickers bars before all was said and done.

I grabbed the bowl and started back to the door. Unlike most kids, this group didn't ring again. It was quiet outside, the only sound the low rumble from the TV. I flicked on the porch light and looked out through the small window set at eye-level in the door.

I couldn't see anything, and at first I thought it might have been a

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prank. The dulcet tones of Elvira's wicked intro was urging me to get ready for some scary shit and I nearly went back to the living room.

But, it didn't sit right to ignore the bell. Some kid was waiting for their candy. If they were the bad kind of child, they might toilet paper my yard, or egg the car. Better to give up a Snickers or two, than to cope with that. So I opened the door.

I was holding the bowl of candy out as the door swung back, and I nearly dropped it when I saw who—no, *what*, my brain insisted—was standing just at the top of the steps.

It was just one kid, small and fragile-looking. Not much more than skin and bones, pale as a ghost, though not dressed as a ghost. No old sheet with cutouts for the eyes and mouth. Just a white face with dark sockets where eyes burned with a fiendish fire.

I forced out a laugh, though what I wanted to do was scream. *Don't be ridiculous*, I chided myself. It's just a kid with rad FX skills.

"That's an awesome costume, little dude. Did you come up with it yourself, or is it from some new fandom?"

The kid just looked at me, those eyes blazing. His mouth—and I say his because I *think* it was a boy—was a thin, wide slit, which I figured he had to have done with some kind of putty. Sharp pointed teeth peeked out.

I nearly jumped out of my shoes when a shadow behind the kid moved. My eyes widened as a taller figure took shape and moved towards me. As it came into the light, I could see it was female, and made up just like the kid. Both were wearing some sort of loose tunic that covered them from chin to foot. Long, thin toes with sharp nails were just visible below the hems.

"Oh, hey there! I didn't see you at first. Ha ha. You know, we don't always get moms who dress up with their kids, at least, not at this level. Do you guys do cos play? I've done a few conventions, maybe we've been to the same ones?"

The kid's mother shook her head. "No, I'm afraid not. This is a special night for us."

Her voice was ghostly, barely louder than the breeze that brought a chill to my skin. For an instant, I lost track of what I was doing.

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I shook myself and realized I was clutching the bowl of candy like a life preserver. My hand trembled as I held it out.

"Well, Halloween *is* special for kids, isn't it? Better than Easter for the sugary goodies, for sure. Help yourself, kid. I think you guys are probably going to be my last visitors for the night, so get one for your mom, too."

The kid's head swiveled around, and at his mother's nod he reached out and took two Snickers bars. Only two. I usually distributed the candy, because some of the little demons took a handful, but this kid took just the two.

"You can have another if you want," I said, shaking the bowl. He just looked up at me, as silent as ever.

His mother moved up and put a pale, bony hand on the kid's shoulder.

"Thank you, but no. Don't want to spoil his dinner."

I looked into her blazing eyes, wondering how she'd done that effect. It would be awesome if I could figure out how that was done, maybe good for a win at the next fan con.

It felt like I was falling into those eyes. I don't know how long we stood there like that, in the yellow glow of the porch light. But after a while she reached out and touched the hand that was still holding that damned bowl out.

"Thank you for your kindness. You're the only house that would open the door for us."

"Hey, no problem. Opening doors for all the little monsters is what it's all about, after all."

Later, while I was watching Elvira's cleavage do some amazing things on the flat screen, I realized I'd never found out what their costumes were meant to be.

Guess I'll have to ask them next year.

GRIFFIN CARMICHAEL WRITES speculative fiction from an undisclosed location somewhere in the Southeastern United States. Various children, animals and species of plant life run rampant everywhere. Upcoming

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projects span science fiction and horror tales from space colonization to more tales from the apocalypse. Previously published work includes two short story collections, Zombie Town *and* Daily Life*, a novella,* Zombie Maneuvers *and a novel,* Z eternal. *Find Griffin's books and get on the mailing list at GriffinCarmichael.com*

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17

THE NOT WANTING

J. DAVID CORE - HORROR

His father was dead. The old-man had never been healthy, so it was only a matter of time before his heart gave out. Still, to his mind, it was somehow shocking that his father, the man who'd always been there, was gone. His mother died due to complications during his and his twin sister's birth, and then his sister died sixteen years later — murdered by her cowardly boyfriend. So now he was all alone in the world, which — to him — was shocking.

When the last guests had gone, when he'd heard the last platitudes about his father being in a better place (the crypt?) when the last of the covered dishes the neighbors brought by had been picked through — he gathered his wits, selected a carving knife from the butcher block, and made his way to the cellar.

To be fair, he wasn't completely alone in the world. Danny was still around, and now he would have to consider his next move. Also, as shocked as he'd been by his father's passing, he also felt suddenly liberated. His father never allowed him to seek the justice his sister deserved. Now there was nothing and nobody standing in his way.

He thought back to that night twenty-five years earlier; his sweet beautiful twin sister so excited and happy to be attending the homecoming dance with Danny, the quarterback and class president. He'd always liked Danny too. After all, as offensive guard it was his responsibility to assure Danny's safety, so he'd better like him. In fact, it was Danny who suggested the anabolic steroids which had ruined his

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own homecoming experience.

After the dance, the four of them skipped the regular after-parties. Danny's family owned a cabin in the country. So Danny invited his date, her brother, and the brother's date to an intimate after-dance fireside meal of chips, sloe-gin and beer beside the lake.

He thought back to that night now, a haunt of memories. The foursome laughing, having fun for a few hours, then his date began making advances. Danny took him aside, handed him protection, offered to let them use the cabin's lone bedroom. Whether it was the beer, the steroids, or just the excitement, he'd been unable to perform. His date felt humiliated. She'd left, taking the car they'd arrived in to go home. He was humiliated as well. He stayed in the cabin sulking, drinking more beer for an hour. Then he'd heard the scream.

Running from the cabin he found Danny assaulting his sister. He lunged at Danny knocking him to the ground. He ran to his sister, and found her limp — her skin turning blue. She was dead. Danny had snapped her neck. He turned on Danny in a rage, chasing him into the woods.

The next morning when his father had awoken, he'd found his son weeping on the couch. He'd final begun to calm enough to tell his father the story without sobbing by the time the police arrived. Danny's father had reported him missing, so they went to the cabin and found the body. Her neck was snapped, and evidence indicated she'd been violated. They asked him if he knew where Danny had gone. He explained how he'd chased Danny into the woods.

The police launched a manhunt, but never found Danny. They never would, and soon it was decided that Danny somehow escaped and made a new life for himself somewhere else. Danny's father had probably helped him, but the police could never prove that. Danny got away with rape and murder that night.

It was more than a week before his father — the man who was then his only remaining family, the man he'd just lost to a heart condition — discovered the truth. Danny hadn't escaped into the woods at all. He was a prisoner in the house of the very girl he'd murdered.

Beneath the basement was an unused secondary root-cellar. His

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father had caught him sneaking water down late at night, and confronted him about why he was keeping the boy who had murdered his sister a captive in their cellar.

He explained that when he caught Danny he'd wanted to kill him, but was afraid that people would blame him for both deaths. Then when the police assumed that Danny was in hiding, he'd been afraid that he'd be in trouble for kidnapping. So he decided to let Danny slowly starve, but he knew that dehydration was a greater risk, so he was giving him water.

His father paced and considered the options. The boy deserved to die for what he'd done, that was true; but was it their right to kill him? Would that be justice or revenge? In the end, he decided that the fact they wanted to kill him meant they could not. Vengeance isn't justice, and their daughter and sister deserved justice. He explained this to his son, but he also realized it was too late to turn him over to the authorities now. Why should his son be punished because of what Danny had done?

So they kept him. For a quarter-century Danny was fed and watered. They installed rudimentary plumbing and shackles. Other than that, they went on with their lives and forgot he was even there with the roaches and spiders. However, now things had changed.

So he was coming down the stairs, knife in hand, remembering the lesson his father taught him. "We can't kill Danny so long as we want to kill him." However, he had one last secret. One night several years before, he'd let Danny plead for his freedom. Danny swore he hadn't killed anyone. They were making love. The scream he'd heard wasn't fear but rapture. They planned to be married. Her neck must have been accidentally broken when a 220-pound guard had suddenly burst upon them wrenching them apart.

He was remembering that night and those words now, realizing it was true. He was remembering his father's words as well. He no longer wanted to kill Danny; and the not-wanting liberated him into action.

WITH A PROFOUND INTEREST IN RELIGION, liberal politics and humor, Dave began writing in High School and has not given up on it since. His first professional writing jobs came while attending the Art Institute of

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Pittsburgh when he was hired to create political cartoons for the Pitt News *& to write humor pieces for* Smile Magazine. *Dave has worked in the newspaper industry as a photographer, in the online publishing industry as a weekly contributor to* Streetmail.com, *and was a contributing writer to the* Buzz On *series of informational books and to the Western online anthology,* Elbow Creek. *Dave's science fiction novel,* Synthetic Blood and Mixed Emotions, *is available from WriteWordsInc. Dave currently resides in his childhood home in Toronto, OH with his beautiful girlfriend and his teenage daughter. He enjoys participating in local community events & visiting with his two adult children and his grandkids. Find his books and get on his mailing list at lupamysteries.blogspot.com.*

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THE KEEPER'S DAUGHTER

J. NAOMI AY

The lighthouse didn't look frightening, at least not from the gate, where Clara stood poised, waiting for the guide. Frankly, there was no reason in the world why a lighthouse ought to be scary. What was it, but a building composed of blocks with a giant light spinning at the top? Granted, it was perched on a bluff and above the sea. But nearly everything in this tiny corner of the world was the same. The wind never stopped blowing here, and the waves never stopped pounding. Only occasionally, was there a day when it didn't rain.

"A Fresnel lens," Mrs. Roberts was saying, smiling broadly and waving her hands at the brilliant white light above them. For fifteen seconds it shone in white and then, for five in red. "It was shipped here all the way from France, through Cape Horn in South America. I can't wait for you girls to see it. Isn't this fun?"

"Yes Mrs Roberts!" Judith gasped, being the only one in the entire troop who liked to do these things.

"Fun," Mary muttered, nudging Clara in the ribs. Her usual sardonic smirk was plastered upon her face. "After all, I had nothing better to do today than climb up ninety-seven cement steps, followed by fourteen rungs on a ladder just to see a light bulb."

"Do we get a badge for this?" Nancy raised a hand, while lovingly rubbing the forty-two patches on her sash, a number that superseded any other girl by at least twice.

"I'd rather be working on the shopping badge." Mary nudged Clara

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again, winking this time with her devilish green eyes. “Have you heard what the requirements are for that one?”

Clara nodded silently, noting the guide was approaching from the Keeper’s House. He was an old man, easily her grandpa’s age or more. Although his feet seemed to be moving quickly enough, his back was bent nearly double, giving the appearance of a turtle lumbering beneath a shell.

“Locate the women’s shoe department at Nordstrom’s. Demonstrate the proper way to remove a credit card from your purse. Select three pairs of your favorite shoes, or one pair and one dress. For extra credit, pose in front of a mirror while the alteration lady pins up your hem.”

“Shh,” Judith hissed, as Mary snickered.

“Girls, this is Captain Greyson from the Coast Guard Auxiliary. He’ll be taking us up the tower in groups of two. Now, who would like to go first?”

“Me!” Judith screamed, raising both hands.

“Me too,” Nancy added, lifting one of hers.

“Clara and Mary will go next.” Mrs. Roberts waved the other girls away, releasing them to dutifully follow the plodding, ancient Auxiliary Captain past the Keeper’s House and into the lighthouse building. “In the meantime, we will wait at the base of the stairway.” Adjusting her official Girl Scout Uniform Cap, Mrs. Roberts proceeded to march across the grassy field separating the two structures.

“Clara,” Mary whispered through the side of her mouth, her eyes sparkling with her latest mischievous plan. “Let’s skip out of here. We’ll do something else. We’ll walk into town and get some food.”

“How?”

Mary nudged her a third time, before raising her hand. “Mrs. Roberts,” she called. “I need to use the bathroom.”

The troop leader spun around, executing a nearly perfect 180 degree pivot to the rear. “The ladies’ powder room is in the Keeper’s House. Don’t tarry overlong.”

“Yes ma’am.” The two girls scampered across the field into the neighboring building.

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ALTHOUGH IT WAS PAINTED white like the lighthouse, the residence was a boring, two-story structure in the shape of a block. There was a single window on the first floor, and two peering out from the bedrooms above, each covered by a thick coating of salt water and endless rain.

Shoving the unlocked door open, the girls were immediately met with a gust of musty, cold air, and the intermittent beeping noise of a smoke detector with a battery gone bad.

"I wonder where the bathroom is." Mary headed through the mudroom and into the building's main hall, while Clara hesitated, an odd chill sweeping down her spine.

"Are you coming?" Mary hollered, her footsteps now resounding on the worn wooden stairs, a noise that for some unknown reason set Clara's heart aflutter. A feeling of regret and profound sadness erupted in her soul, as well as the inexplicable sensation of déjà vu.

"I think it's up there. I'm going to check the bedrooms."

"Okay," Clara whispered, refusing to leave her spot.

In fact, she decided she'd rather wait outside, and was turning to do exactly that when the door swung open. Auxiliary Captain Greyson stood before her, his bent back bringing his gaze nearly level with her own.

"You shouldn't be in here," he said, his voice sounding oddly familiar. There was a tone of regret in it, and something else. Fondness? Pity? Strangely, the old man's eyes were looking upon her as if he knew her. "You need to go on your way. I cannot, until you do."

"What?"

"Clara, please?" He held out a hand, gnarled and thin.

"Clara!" Mary screamed from the floor above. "Clara, get up here right now! You've got to see this."

"Excuse me," the girl mumbled, hastily running from the old man to the stair, swiftly mounting the steps, her hand on the dusty rail.

Once upstairs, Clara walked down the hall to the second bedroom, knowing instinctively that was where she was meant to go. It was even colder than the floor below, the only illumination coming through the salt-covered window, where she found Mary bathed in the sweeping

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white light of the lighthouse's Fresnel lens.

"Look at this," Mary gasped, now turning red. She handed Clara a framed newsprint from nearly sixty years before. Yellow and wrinkled, it had been sitting on bureau collecting dust. Between the slashes exposed by Mary's fingertips, Clara read the headline.

"Tragedy at the Lighthouse! Keeper's Young Daughter Killed in a fall."

Below that, Clara saw her own face.

"It's time for you to move on," Mary said, her skin peeling off her body. Beneath that innocent green Girl Scout uniform, Mary exposed herself as a hideous messenger of Satan's Army. "I ought to get a badge for coming to fetch you, don't you think?" Reaching out, she grabbed Clara's arm with a clawed hand.

While the room turned again from Fresnel Red to Fresnel White, Clara was sucked into the hideous world below.

"What did I do?" she cried, as the flames came up to meet her.

"You didn't read the article?" The demon laughed. "You pushed the Keeper's daughter, your baby sister, down all ninety-seven of the lighthouse stairs."

NAOMI RESIDES in the north Olympic Peninsula and loves to dream of space adventures while her dog sleeps under her desk. She is the author of two epic scifi/fantasy series, the sixteen volume Two Moons of Rehnor *series and the six volume* Firesetter *series. Find her books and get on her mailing list at JNaomiAy.com.*

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THE HULDRA

J.T. WILLIAMS - HORROR

The problem with the North Sea is that it's so damn cold. Well, that's one problem. You would think to move from the Carolinas in the good old U.S. of A. that it wouldn't be too bad to do some technical work for 6 months in the dead of a Norwegian winter. You'd also be wrong.

I'm used to working around other men for months on end but when you struggle to speak a single Norse word about the only thing you might can find is a good Norwegian woman. Except, on an oil rig there are no women. Just me and some guys. In case you were wondering, that's not my thing.

Luckily, due to a severe mechanical malfunction we'd been moved back to Oslo. I took a cab to the outskirts of town near a large woods. Something called *Helvetehor.*

There's a nice bar here. Seemed like a good, laid-back place, plus I'd heard it was frequented by what I do want — women. Attractive women. Something I needed... like right then.

I went up to the bar and ordered a beer. It was a bit more sour than I preferred but it would get me started. There were plenty of women — and one old man. I sat down at the bar and scanned for those that might notice me.

I turned to take another sip from my beer and someone sat down beside me.

Good.

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I turned and, to my disgust, found the old man.

"You're an American aren't you?"

"You assume that pretty quickly."

"You sound like an American. I didn't assume shit. You shouldn't either. I see you looking at these women. Don't bother. You don't want them."

This old man is funny.

"Really? I take it you've had personal experience in that?"

He glared at me and snorted.

"No? Then buzz off, grandpa. I don't need your dating advice."

"Aye, take care but the hands of the Huldra take the willing."

The man stumbled out and I was left alone.

What the hell was he spouting off about anyway? What in the hell is a huldra? Damn, I need another beer. And a shot.

At least the bartender seemed attentive.

The hours passed and I was getting drunk. The sun was down, now that it had been up for very long to start with. I heard the door open and an attractive blond came in. I say, I guess another attractive blond, but unfortunately the others weren't too keen to talk to me. There was one but she only stared — and not in a good way. She was now glaring at me from the corner of the room.

What the hell did I do?

I turned my attention to the girl next to me.

"Can I just have some vodka?" she asked.

The bartender served her up a shot and she slammed it.

Her accent was familiar. She was American too, I'd say from the Northeast. Boston maybe.

"Hey," I said. I knew it was cheesy but it was something.

She smiled. You're American"

"Working in the north, ya know, oil."

She gave me a coy smirk. "Cool, I'm here on a story for a magazine. I'm alone other than my camera guy but I was trying to find something a bit more fun to do."

I have something fun for you.

That blond pushed her way between myself and my fellow American.

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"Sorry," the blond said in a seductive way. "I've been watching and when foreign you should try foreign delights. Not cheap, sad things like her."

I love this accent, wow. Maybe it's like Russian, I don't know.

The American girl turned and stomped off.

Ha! I think she's crying. What can I say, I guess I am an asshole.

It was love — or maybe it was a mix of the alcohol and her sweet scent that drew me away from the bar as she led me out the door.

"Let's get away from here."

I laughed as she laughed and tried to hide her smile. Her eyes moved up and down me. I grinned almost foolishly and with a jaunt through the snow she took me into the woods. I thought at first maybe her car was parked at the nearby recreation area but we went deeper. I stopped.

"Where are we going?"

She stood straight, her legs together. Her tight skirt formed around her body and her cleavage poked through a short coat. I watched her as she scanned the area. There was something on her back that I hadn't noticed before. It looked strange.

Had she been running backward or was I just that drunk?

She pushed herself against me.

"I know what you want. I know what all men like you want and I give it to you."

"Oh yeah?" I breathed heavily.

Her fingertips glided down my stomach. Something slippery moved up my leg but she kissed me before I could look down. I threw my arms around her back to feel her body but… her skin was coarse. It felt oddly familiar but even in my drunken state knew I shouldn't be feeling *that*. I glanced around at the trees.

That's what it is. Am I pushing her against a tree?

Her hands gripped my waist and I gasped.

Okay, finally.

A tearing pain shot through my stomach and I coughed as a roughness pushed straight up through my throat. She let out a shrill sound and her eyes turned red.

"Filth of a man," she said in a ragged voice, "I give you your

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release!”

I tasted blood and the world spun as I fell to the ground.

She withdrew something from my body.

Have I been stabbed? Shot?

I’d never felt this kind of pain. She turned. Her back was tree bark and a bloody tail whipped behind her as she disappeared into the approaching storm, my blood melting into the snow.

Footsteps crunched nearby and the old man from the bar came into view, laughing, a shovel in his hands.

“I told you the Huldra take the willing!” He dumped snow on me and the light faded, the coolness oddly comforting.

What the hell is a Huldra?

The old man snorted. “Stupid boy. He wanted something local but didn’t study his lore. Third one in two days. These woods are getting full and my old back is sore. She doesn’t pay me enough for this.”

J.T. Williams is the author of the Saints of Wura *trilogy and the* Half-Elf Chronicles. *When he isn't writing, he wages war in his backyard with his children having make-believe battles against the orcs invading from next door. He is married and has five little orc slayers. As a longtime lover of fantasy and the surreal, he hopes you enjoy his contributions to the world of fantasy and magic. Find his books and get on his mailing list at AuthorJTWilliams.com.*

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PART III

FANTASY

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20

THE ANGEL

RICHARD CRAWFORD - FANTASY

It's late. The night slides vodka-sodden towards its end. I'm behind the bar, rolling a cigarette, the filter stashed between my lips, but some instinct always warns me to his presence.

He comes in late, when the club is winding down. The dead predawn hours are his time. There are many of the club's regulars you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley, but something about him sets my teeth on edge. My fingers take a pinch of baccy and thoughtlessly continue the routine task as I follow his progress through the crowd.

I see there's a girl with him tonight. She's tall, whisper thin, and moves like a supermodel, long easy stride, killer confidence, but even from a distance I feel the pain behind the show. As she comes close, I see it in her eyes. A broken angel. Innocence and pain, the same as all his women. I've never seen him with the same one twice.

The filter dangles between my lips, the rollup forgotten. I snap my mouth shut and pick up the baccy tin. My fingers shake a little as I stash the rollup.

He leads her up to the bar. It's tight packed but a space clears as he approaches. A mane of shaggy dark hair hangs down his back, and the writhing dragon tat on his neck disappears beneath a worn leather jacket. There's always something familiar in him. Our eyes meet and hackles rise, like to like.

“Tequila shots,” he says, staring me down.

I pour the shots and watch the angel.

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Beneath the strobing lights, her hair gleams silver, slicked down close to her skull like a dude from one of those old movies. It makes her look porcelain fragile. Silver studs in her nose and ears. She wears a silver bracelet, more like an intricately engraved glove, on her right hand. I've never seen anything like it before, some sort of bondage antique jewelry piece? The lights give it a shimmering life of its own and, for a moment, I can't tear my eyes away.

She moves when he moves, like she can't stay close enough to him. The pack of guys leer, and she gives the tiniest of shivers. The guys move towards her, like filings to a magnet. He lets them come; then one look from dead eyes and they ooze backwards. The angel leans into him, grateful. He's turned away to talk to some bloke, paying no attention to her, and she catches me staring, aquamarine eyes hold mine for a moment and she gives me a little smile. I want to come over the bar and take her away from him.

He turns back, sees me looking and his cold black eyes shrivel my nuts. I look away, coward and worse.

He stays at the bar. She's on him like skin, and he smiles when he sees me helplessly watching, waves me back over.

“Another round.”

I take his money and walk away. Down the bar, Josie's serving a crowd of loud-mouthed girls. I slide behind her, put a hand on her ass.

“Get lost,” she growls and I wonder what she's seen.

When I glance back, he has his fingers curled loosely round the angel's neck. My breath catches.

Josie shoots me a look.

“I need a smoke,” I say. “You okay?”

She nods casually, never any doubt, she has the bar covered.

I lean close, avoiding her gaze, and whisper thanks in her ear. At the door, I turn for a last look at my angel.

Outside bins crowd the alley. The air hangs thick with the smell of rotting food and rats, beneath it all the stink of the river, running hard and high a few yards away.

I don't even know her name. I don't want to know her name. I think about Josie, smart-mouthed, easygoing, no punter can get the better of

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her. Hard as nails till you know her, then a heart bigger than a London bus. But it doesn't work; aquamarine eyes and smiling lips tug my attention away.

I stay outside with the rats. Start another cigarette and watch the river. It's silent, an unfed monster waiting to swallow up the city. I flick the cigarette butt into the dark water and turn back. Josie will be pissed off if I leave her and the bouncers to deal with the end of night drunks.

The door opens before I reach it. It swings softly back, hangs, waiting. I slide into the shadows. Knowing, sensing her like a familiar scent on the air.

He leads her out and his tequila husky voice is soft as a whisper. “I have something for you,” a promise made without looking back. No doubt she will follow, drawn to him and the promise.

It's not one I would want to redeem. The angel doesn't hear what I hear. He guides her ahead of him and moves up close behind. His hands are on her as they pass me, a shadow among shadows, and walk down to the river.

He grips her arm and she stops, lets him press her up against the wall. He comes up close, catches her wrists and lifts her arms above her head as he kisses her. Silver and fragile, the fabric of her shirt quivers an invitation. With one hand, he reaches out to undo the buttons. Pale skin glimmers as he draws her away from the wall. The shirt falls. She slides her arms around his neck and melts against him. He presses her against the wall again. They kiss and I feel sick, a mix of lust and disgust and fear.

The kiss is long and greedy. It holds him motionless and only when she draws away do his hands rise to touch her. She's still, her breath shallow, as his hands slide across her skin. His eyes are locked to hers. I watch as his hand reaches for the blade.

He raises it slowly. If she sees it, there's no sign. I'm glad she has no fear in these last moments. I hear her gasp as the metal touches her skin.

“Shush.” He smiles and presses the flat of the blade against her neck, blood oozes, red against her white skin.

Her head tilts back in some sort of surrender, and he snarls with pleasure. I feel the same surge of power. He wants the final moment to

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last forever, but the blade trembles as his control weakens.

He sighs and his fingers tighten on the hilt. He enjoys it for one last lingering moment.

With the grace of a dancer, she lowers her right arm, the one with the bracelet, fingers splayed in some sort of plea. He shakes his head. Her hand drops lower. As I watch, silver shimmers and springs towards his ribs. The spring-mounted blade rips deep, though she stands motionless, emotionless.

He makes a soft noise, no time for more.

The knife twitches and drops from his hand.

The tableau holds for a moment. Then her hand twists, jerks upward towards his heart. A slight smile on her lips as she looks into his eyes, some silent final communion.

Before he falls, she walks him back towards the river. He can't resist her, his hands clutch and flail at empty air. With a last push, he's gone.

The night is silent apart from distant sirens and the roar of traffic. The city is never silent. The quiet beats in my heart.

She bends, picks up her shirt, and holds it in one hand. Blood drips from the other, a darkness running from the blade. She watches the river for a moment and then turns and strides towards me.

I wait on her judgment. She comes close, aquamarine eyes search my soul and I forget how to breathe.

“He was rotten bad,” she says. “But you know that.” She's tall, as tall as I am. Her finger traces the line of my jaw, the bloodied blade glistening close to my eye. “The world's a better place.” Something like humor in her voice, but cold, so cold. I look into her eyes and can't look away.

She waits, holding all the power and I nod.

Her other hand comes up fast and she smiles as I flinch. The coldest smile in the world. She touches my face, soft but not a caress.

“Next time…” Her fingers rest cold against my skin. “You'll tell me.”

I nod. A pact is made.

“Good,” she says and watches me for a moment longer, until she's certain I understand the gift she's giving. She turns away, disappears into the night.

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Josie's face flashes before my eyes.

I find an old paper and see the headline a few days later. A photoFit, but his face beneath the headline. Manhunt after two women attacked. The paper's torn. I spread it on the bar, piece it together. The text blurs, two women attacked in a London park, one dead, one critical.

I remember the look in the angel's eyes and know she'll be back.

Richard Crawford writes horror (ghost stories) and epic fantasy. He is the author of the novels Ghost House, Ghost Town *and* Ghost Mate *(The* Soul Mate *series) and the* Traitor Blade *books 1-3, (epic/historical fantasy and recent semi-finalist in the* Self Published Blog-Off *for fantasy books). His new book,* Ghost Road *will be released in early 2017. Find his books and get on his mailing list at RichardCrawfordAuthor.com.*

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IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

BILL HIATT - FANTASY

Inger gave him another musical sounding laugh. “You’re not a monster!”

Diablo looked back at her, his expression as serious as a train wreck. “It’s all a question of perspective. Of course, when your parents name you after the devil, it’s hard not to wonder what’s wrong with you.”

Inger chuckled this time and took a sip of her red wine. He noticed she had hardly touched her food. That was annoying, since he’d taken her to the most expensive place in town for their Halloween date. Annoying, but expected.

“Ah, your parents aren’t the only ones with no common sense about baby names. My family was Romanian, but my mother insisted on Inger, which sounds Scandinavian.”

Diablo had to agree the beautiful, olive-skinned brunette across from him did not look particularly Scandinavian.

“She picked the name because înger means *angel* in Romanian.”

“You’re lovely enough to be an angel,” he told her. That wasn’t just a line; he really meant it despite his unemotional tone.

Inger gave him a Mona Lisa smile. “You’re certainly not ugly enough to be a devil—though for all I know you may be horny.”

That got a flicker of a smile from Diablo. Inger had begun to think he didn’t know how to smile.

“When I was twelve, I killed one of my friends,” he said without a

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trace of emotion in his voice. Inger's smile vanished.

"That's not funny," she said softly, looking into his dark eyes, darker even than hers. They complemented his dark hair and skin, skin that was almost like ebony to her ivory.

"It wasn't meant to be."

"It was an accident, surely," she protested, still not certain if he was joking or not.

He sighed. "It was an accident. I… gave him too much of what I have."

Inger raised an eyebrow. "If you don't want to talk about it…"

"No, I do. I've never talked about it with anyone before. I'm… I don't really know how to explain what I am. I guess you could say I'm an inverse vampire."

Inger leaned closer. "Is that some kind of dig at my Romanian background? Even in the folklore of the old country, there's no such thing as an 'inverse vampire.' What do you do, make other people drink your blood?"

"Not exactly," Diablo replied slowly. "Vampires lack life force of their own and have to keep drawing it from others by drinking their blood."

"Vampires aren't real," Inger said reflexively.

Diablo ignored her—not a problem she usually had with men.

"I, on the other hand, produce too much life force. If I don't… *offload* is the best word I can think of. If I don't offload some of it to someone else every so often, I'd explode."

"You have got to be kidding!" she protested.

"I've had that problem ever since puberty," he continued, again acting as if she had said nothing. "But I didn't really know what I was doing at first."

"Diablo!" she snapped, thinking that perhaps saying his name would get his attention. He stopped and looked at her.

"I would think giving people more life force would be a good thing," she said, beginning to wonder if she was having dinner with a madman. "Wouldn't it make them stronger, maybe even heal them if they were injured in some way?"

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Diablo nodded. “Yeah, it would—in small enough doses. My problem was I didn’t know how to control the flow from me to someone else at first. That’s why my friend died. I gave him too much, and his heart couldn’t take the strain.”

Inger noticed his eyes almost seemed to glow. It must be a trick of the light, the reflection of the flickering candle flames.

“I cried for days after,” Diablo said slowly. “But then I knew I’d have to try again. I could feel the life force building up, burning me inside.

“I practiced on animals. I killed my poor dog and a couple of other neighborhood pets. That made me feel even worse, but I did eventually get the hang of how much I could safely transfer to any person at any time.”

Inger leaned even closer. “But how… how do you transfer part of your life force to another? Blood?”

Diablo chuckled himself then—but it was a cold chuckle. “I think Santiago would have balked at drinking my blood… balked and lived. No, I can do it by touch. Skin on skin does the trick.”

“But you’ve touched me, and—”

“Thank God it doesn’t happen automatically, or I’d probably have killed more people when I was young. I have to will it to happen.”

“It’s safe when you do it, now, though?” asked Inger, staring at him intensely. “There’s no danger?”

“I haven’t killed a human since poor Santiago,” replied Diablo.

Inger started looking at him if she were starving and he was an enormous steak—ironic since the filet mignon lay practically untouched on the plate in front of her.

“Prove it to me, Diablo. Let’s make love tonight, and when we lie together, ‘skin on skin,’ as you said, give me some of your life force.”

“There’s no need to wait,” said Diablo, grabbing her hand roughly. Instinctively, she wanted to pull away, but it was already too late by the time her muscles started to react.

She could feel the life force flowing into her, burning her. She went from mild discomfort to agony in seconds. Only self-control honed by long practice prevented her from screaming.

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She wrenched her hand away from him, but she knew she was too late.

"No, I haven't harmed any *human* since Santiago," said Diablo calmly, "but I do have an interesting effect on vampires."

Her abruptly rehumanized body shook as she realized what she'd lost. "You…you *are* a monster," she whispered.

"It's all a matter of perspective," replied Diablo, voice cold as ice.

As far back as he can remember, Bill Hiatt had a love for reading so intense that he eventually ended up owning over eight thousand books—not counting ebooks! He has also loved to write for almost that long. As an English teacher, he had little time to write, though he always felt there were stories within him that longed to get out. Now that he is retired from teaching, the stories are even more anxious to get out into the world, and they will not be denied! Find his books and get on his mailing list at BillHiatt.com.

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JEALOUS (A WOLF'S HEART)

CARMILLA CROSS - YA PARANORMAL FANTASY

He told her he was busy that evening, which was about two weeks before the Halloween dance. His mother also had him already running errands for her, while she went out with her friends for some kind of night out on the town. He sounded disgusted with the very idea, as if it repulsed him to know that his mother had a social life.

"I could come over and cheer you up, you know," Lindy purred, her gravelly voice even scratchier than usual. Gabe had laughed at that, but it was different this time around.

Something in the tone of his voice was…*off*. Her acute hearing had picked it up the second he answered the phone, but she ignored it, and decided it was all in her head. He told her his *errands* would take all night and that maybe they could go out tomorrow.

His mother would likely sleep until noon, which would allow him to sneak out of the house in the morning.

"Maybe we can go to the lake," he suggested. "Do you know how to swim?"

He was trying to distract her, and she knew it. But Lindy played along and even planned to fish out last year's swimsuit. She and Gabe began dating at the start of summer. She hadn't told him yet about her *affliction* but prayed that he wouldn't be too put off by it. After all, the small population of werewolves in their town was peaceful, so long as they were able to get their hands on enough raw meat during the full

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moon.

She remembered being a puppy and running around under the light of her first swollen moon, chasing bunnies and deer. Her father had caught her in one big claw and stuffed a small steak into her mouth. She was five when she turned. Her mother was human and hadn't really wanted the werewolf life for her daughter. As peaceful as they were, there were still people who didn't quite understand their kind. But Lindy had gotten into a wrestling match with her baby cousin—who was already a full werewolf—and he accidentally bit her. The rest was history.

Now she used all her heightened senses in order to figure out why her new boyfriend was lying to her. He seemed to really like her and she was quickly falling in love with him, which was dangerous. Her mother had warned her about falling in love with humans when you were any part werewolf, let alone fully-changed, but she couldn't help it.

To her, Gabe was the perfect guy and very handsome. She already dreamed of having his babies; they would get his tanned skin and light-brown curly hair, and maybe her button nose and blue-violet eyes.

But god she was only sixteen! And if he was acting so strangely after barely a few months, what would he be like after a year? Or a decade? She decided she had to fix this now before it all went to shit.

It wasn't too hard to track him down. She still had the sweater he'd wrapped her in one night during the last week of humid summer evenings, when she pretended to be cold just to snuggle up to him. She could practically feel her tail wag that night, even though there wasn't a full moon then.

She shook those thoughts off her head—because really, what would they matter if she had to tear his limbs off for cheating on her?—and began to follow his scent. This wasn't right, using her senses to track down her boyfriend and not trusting him like a girlfriend was supposed to do. He had lied to her and betrayed her trust anyway, so this was really all his fault.

She spotted him walking down the street with a bouquet of flowers in his hand and his hair slicked back, actually combed for once.

Lindy felt her heart drop. The bastard was cheating on her! She growled low in her throat and began stomping after him, keeping her

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distance so she could out him in front of whatever hussy he—

She paused.

He wasn't walking toward any restaurant or even the movie theater. He made a sharp left turn into the…cemetery?

Lindy frowned as she crept after Gabe, following his scent so that she could stay far enough away and not be seen. He didn't even pause for a second; he knew exactly where he was going. She continued to follow him as he wove through the gravestones until he came to a big marble cross. It looked relatively new and un-cracked among the rest. Gabe stopped in front of it, placed his flowers at the base, then got to his knees and pressed his forehead against the cool stone. She could hear him murmuring something—a prayer maybe—before he pulled away and sat cross-legged, right there in the damp grass.

"Hey, Dad," he said, and Lindy's paw flew to her mouth reflexively to stifle a gasp that sounded more like a faint yelp. "Long time, no see. Boy have I got a lot to tell you! My girlfriend and I…"

Lindy smiled with tears misting in her eyes and turned around, making her way back quickly through the cemetery. She took a deep breath when she hit the streets and gave a relieved sigh. She started to make a list of all the ways she could make this up to him.

Perhaps a few dozen cookies would do it? Or she could cook him his favorite dinner if she had to. There were thousands of possibilities and each one sounded better than the last.

She had a big to-do list.

CARMILLA KNEW she would write a lot about love and the paranormal once she discovered young adult paranormal romances. She dreams of the day when she will have any or all of her works striking a massive chord with readers and fans everywhere. Then just maybe, they will also get to have successful movie and TV shows of their own. Find her books and get on her mailing list at moonrise-by-carmilla-cross.tumblr.com.

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NEVER A NIGHT OFF

LINCOLN COLE - FANTASY

"Did you see where he went?" Dominick asked, stepping up alongside his friend and glancing out over the crowd. The Halloween party at The Rusty Nail was in full swing and everyone was wearing a costume. The likelihood of spotting their demonic target in the crowd was getting less likely by the second.

"No," Curtis replied. "But, I know where he's heading."

Dominick could barely hear him over the sound of the music. Curtis dropped down off of the raised dance platform and pushed his way through the club, heading for the alley out back. Dominick followed, glancing behind them to make sure they weren't being followed.

The music disappeared when they stepped outside and closed the door behind them. It was a cool night, and the wind whipping over his skin refreshed him.

"Just once," he said. "I would like to come to one of these parties when we're *not* working."

"We're always on the job. Frieda needs us to handle this tonight."

"You would think we would at least get Halloween off, right?"

Curtis ignored him and began walking down the alley. Their target was ahead of them by maybe fifty meters, hands tucked in the pockets of his sweatshirt and the hood pulled over his shoulder. He was heading for the street and didn't know he was being followed.

Curtis slipped a pistol out of his pocket, picking up the pace.

"I thought we need him alive," Dominick whispered, falling into step

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beside his friend.

"That's the best case. I'm not taking any chances."

They were maybe ten meters behind when Dominick's foot scuffed across the pavement. The man glanced back at them and time seemed to stop when he recognized them.

"Crap," Dominick said.

Everything happened all at once: the man in the hoodie turned and sprinted down the alley and Curtis raised his pistol. He fired off three shots: the first two missed, but the third tagged the demon in the collarbone.

He barely even flinched and kept sprinting toward the mouth of the alley. The two Hunters took off after him, and now Dominick slid his gun free as well.

"We can't let him get away," Curtis said.

Dominick didn't reply. Their target was a ruthless and conniving creature that had already wrecked three bodies in the last two months. If he got away now he would simply find a new person to inhabit and disappear, wasting months of tracking. He didn't know why Frieda needed him, but it was something big.

The demon ran down the street to the right, weaving through traffic. It was late at night—or early morning, depending on who you asked—but there were still people out and about. It was, after all, Halloween.

They dodged through the crowd after him, only a few steps behind. The demon reached an intersection and ran into the middle of the road, forcing traffic to stop and swerve around him. Horns blared and drivers shouted in anger, but the demon ignored them.

Dominick slid over the hood of one of the cars, closing the distance to his prey. The demon made it to a construction area with a wooden overhand protecting the sidewalk. Instead of running under the overhang, it leapt into the air and landed on top of it, climbing the scaffolding up the front of the building.

"Great," Dominick mumbled, climbing up a fence to chase after it.

"I'll go around."

Curtis ran down the road to try and cut the demon off. That left Dominick in pursuit alone, scaling the side of a building in pursuit of the

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demon.

His target found an opening inside on the third floor and jumped in, running toward the far side of the building. Dominick rolled in after it, raising his pistol to fire. He didn't aim for the body, but instead went for a leg.

His second shot pegged the demon in the calf and it stumbled forward as the muscles of the body it was inhabiting gave out. It staggered to the ground, giving Dominick enough time to catch up. He came in hard, kicking and punching at the demon with abandon.

The demon deflected and dodged his attacks, finding its footing and backing away. It countered, deflecting a kick from Dominick and punching him first in the kidney and then the chest. It followed it a roundhouse kick to the side of his head, throwing him into the wall.

Then, it turned to run again, reaching the other side of the building and stepping out one of the open windows. Dominick moved to follow, dazed, and staggered after it.

"That could have gone better."

Outside, he saw the demon climbing down the scaffolding toward another overhang two floors below. It was moving slow, barely having use of its leg, but it had a decent head start. Down the street Dominick could see Curtis rounding the corner, coming to help.

He slipped out the window and moved quickly down the scaffolding, ending up near the second floor just as the demon stepped onto the wooden overhang.

"Here goes nothing," he mumbled, taking a steadying breath.

He leapt off the scaffolding and onto the demon, landing heavily on it and slamming them both down onto the overhang. They landed hard and he felt the structure wobbling beneath them.

The demon rolled over, elbowing Dominick in the ear, and then it tried to crawl away.

He grabbed the demon by the leg, shifted, and then threw him sideways off of the overhang. It slammed onto the roadway and lay still. Curtis ran up to it, kneeling over top the demon and checking if it was still alive.

Dominick climbed down off the railing, landing on the road next to

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them, and together they dragged the demon onto the sidewalk.

"Nice job," Curtis said, short of breath. "Let's get him back to Frieda."

"Just once," Dominick reiterated, shaking his head. "I would like to pretend we have normal jobs."

Lincoln Cole is a Columbus-based author who enjoys traveling and has visited many different parts of the world, including Australia and Cambodia, but always returns home to his pugamonster and wife. His love for writing was kindled at an early age through the works of Isaac Asimov and Stephen King and he enjoys telling stories to anyone who will listen. Find his books and get on his mailing list at LincolnCole.net.

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HUNTING PARTY

A. E. WASP - URBAN FANTASY

Sunset Cloud loves the way they look, all the different colored tents spread out in the snowy glade. You never know what you're going to get when you pick up one of the brightly-colored coverings. Generally, the bigger ones have more good stuff inside, but not always. Sometimes they have only one human and a bunch of inedible things, but that one human is often the sweet, melt-in-your-mouth kind. Sunset Cloud stays away from the smallest containers, the cramped, only-come-up-to-your-shin ones. They're inevitably filled with the stringy, beef-jerky humans. She hates those. Old Treebreaker likes those the most, says they keep his jaw strong, but more likely his constant talking is the reason for his jaw strength. She likes a little fat with her meals, it's good for her coat. Alpenglow said her hair shined like the river in the moonlight. Maybe she'll invite him for a swim in the moonlight when the thaw hits.

Treebreaker pushes closer to her. She growls at him, showing fang as she does. "Sorry," he says.

She grabs his arm, her claws like daggers on his dull, gray fur. She remembers when his fur was as bright as the leaves of the aspens before the snow, but that was a long time ago when she could still walk under her mother's legs and her feet were smaller than a human's. Now she's the tallest in the clan, and her footprints draw spotters from all directions. "Don't move."

He stops, head hung, eyes downcast. She pities him, his strength

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leached away by the last hundred years. She knows it will be her one day. The more cubs she bears, the more she feels the passing of time and the weight of mortality. So she fights it the only way she knows how, by ensuring that the name of the Sunrise Clan Sasquatch of the Middle Mountains will go down in legend. For too many years the Sasquatches of the Western Water Clan have been preeminent among clans. They hold records for both the closest encounter with humans and for the number of encounters. And don't think they don't brag about that at every gathering. She's getting tired of hearing how they've found the perfect time of day and lighting to show just enough to keep the humans coming back but never enough for absolute proof. And the Western Water Clan is wasteful, too. They eat almost none of the humans they find, preferring to play with them instead. They get the humans all hopped up and excited and then just let them go. Of course, they can live on loggers and bear alone. Food's a little more scarce here in the high Rockies.

Sunset Cloud's expectations for tonight are sky-high. The last path she made, over rocks and through piles of fallen pine needles with the occasional enormous print just clear enough to get hopes up, was a work of art. The humans started entering the glade an hour or so ago, after a two-day walk from the nearest road. Humans walk slowly and ponderously in the snow. Nightfall forces them to stop and settle. Tomorrow, they'll get up early to look for her. She counts eleven containers, all bright colors. A few of the humans move around, doing whatever it is humans do.

A loud shuffling from behind her announces Alpenglow's arrival. Snow falls from the trees with a soft pitter-patter as he slides to a stop behind her. Muted as the sound is, it still attracts the attention of at least one of the humans in the clearing below.

She grabs Alpenglow, pressing him deeper into the shadows. "Quiet," she hisses.

He peers around her shoulder. "So many. Are we going to get one tonight? I hear it's easy when they are in their dens. The bears do it all the time."

"That's why bears get hunted," Sunset Cloud answers.

His mouth opens in an O of understanding, and he nods. He's not the

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brightest ‘Squatch, but he’s strong and good-looking. She probably should have left him behind on this trip, but the nights are long and cold this time of year. A little company makes them warmer and brighter. His red hair feels silky under her hands as she pats him reassuringly. “Don't worry. We’ll get one tomorrow. After we play with them for a while.”

Alpenglow hugs her, smiling, and she leans into him. He’s almost as tall as she is, his feet almost as large. Maybe he would be a good father for her cubs. If she’s lucky, they’ll have his looks and her brains. “Back to the cave,” she says. “I’ll meet you there after I lay some more tracks.”

Alpenglow leaves with a nose nuzzle, Treebreaker with a grumble. She ignores both of them, caught up in the fantasy of knocking the Western Water clan off their high perch. As the sun slips behind the mountains, a flash of light catches her eye. Two humans watch her from across the snow. The game is on.

From the other side of the glade, the man and woman watch her go. The man drops his high-powered binoculars. The woman looks through her scope a little longer.

“Should we go after them?” he asks.

“There’s three of them, two of us.”

“But we have guns.” He points his rifle upslope.

“One of them is ten feet tall,” she says.

“Good point. I just can't wait to show up to the BRFO Conference with an actual capture. Screw those Washington guys and their unfocused videos.”

“Tomorrow.” She smiles. What he lacks in planning, he makes up for in enthusiasm and looks. “Don't count your Sasquatches before they're caught,” she cautions.

They head back down to the tents. “I hate winter camping,” the guy complains.

“I bet we can find a way to get warm.”

“Now you’re talking,” he grabs her arm, hurrying her.

She looks back up the hill. *Tomorrow*.

Amy writes LGBT focused Contemporary and Fantasy Romance because

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she likes her bad guys caught and her endings happy. She lives in Northern Colorado and can often be found roaming the backroads in a green mini-van. Find her books and get on her mailing list at AEWasp.com.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my fellow authors for your trust, support, patience and ingenuity. It's great working with you!

A big thanks to KBoards, where the 20 indie authors behind *Monster Maelstrom* planned this work.

Fellow author Alasdair C. Shaw suggested the name of our series: *Flash Flood*.

Our greatest appreciation goes to you, dear reader, for giving these stories a few moments of your time, and hopefully, leaving us a short review to let us know if you liked them or not.

Thank you!

(And stand by for the next anthologies in the *Flash Flood* series, themed for Christmas, Valentine's Day, May the 4th and Independence Day.)

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ABOUT THE EDITOR



Former starship redshirt turned rag-clad resistance fighter, **George Donnelly** is the author of space opera, cyberpunk & post-apocalyptic science fiction series. A single unschooling expat dad, George prefers zombies to aliens but is primed for any meatspace apocalypse minus grey goo.

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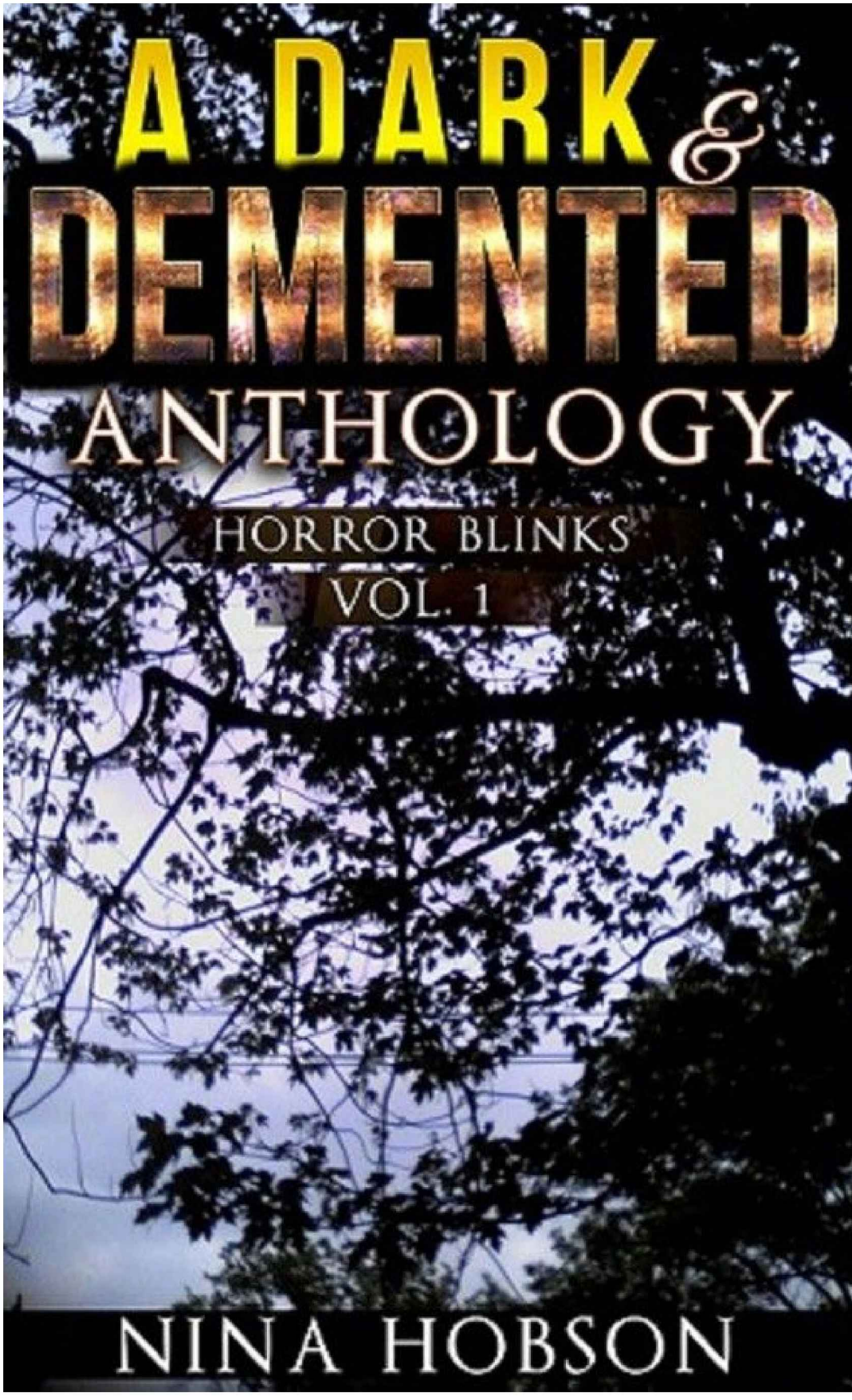
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A DARK & DEMENTED
ANTHOLOGY
HORROR BLINKS
VOL. 1
NINA HOBSON

A DARK & DEMENTED ANTHOLOGY: HORROR BLINKS (VOL. 1)

Nina Hobson

¶

PRONOUN

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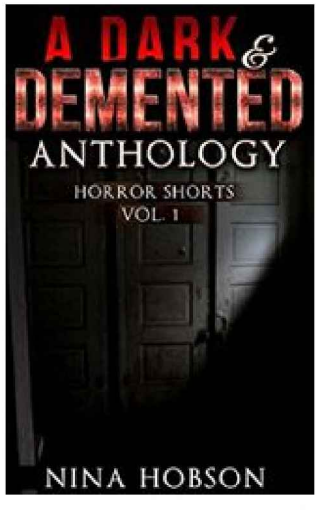
More by Nina Hobson

A DARK & DEMENTED ANTHOLOGY

HORROR BLINKS (VOL. 1)

WRITTEN BY NINA HOBSON

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FAMILY

IT WAS GOOD THE REAL estate agent wasn't as ethical as he should have been. Full disclosure their asses.

The unkempt Victoria had sat on the market for over a year. Weather-worn and unloved but sturdy and regal, they knew it was for them. It would be a good place for them to recuperate after their last miscarriage, a beautiful place to start their family. They were still young and had lots of love to give. Somewhere out there a child needed them. They wanted a child. They would do anything to have a family.

Thank God for adoption.

"Good news, she may be here to stay next week," his wife squealed in joy.

The attic still held a twin-sized bed plus pink furniture and drapes, everything their daughter would want. All it needed was a bit of cleaning.

She would be happy here with them. They would be a family.

"Look what I found at the store. A pink table lamp with a built-in clock. It matches, don't you think? The woman caught her husband's excitement, rode its waves right along with him.

"She'll love it!

He strutted into the room, grinning, a can of Pearl White paint held high in each hand.

"For our little princess."

She laughed, nodded in happiness.

They spent the rest of the day painting the room and the remainder of the week lugging the furniture and other things from the attic, cleaning and arranging it all in the small bedroom.

On the last day, they called it quits. The phone rang and they both raced to answer. Giggling, she beat him to it.

"Hello?"

"Yes, we did it. It's quite lovely, in fact."

We did the best we could.

"You can come anytime tomorrow to check it if you'd like. I'm sure it'll be good enough."

Please let us be good enough.

"You'll think about it?"

Please let her be ours.

"Okay, then. Goodnight."

Sitting in their homey, yellow and white kitchen, at their table set for three, picking at a dinner of soup and sandwiches, he allowed the doubts to resurface.

"What if it's not enough?" He stared at his wife, stricken. "What if *we* aren't enough?"

His wife, bless her soul, just shook her head.

"Any child would be happy to have us as their parents. Besides, we'll know either way tomorrow. Until then, we keep the faith."

The verdict came a few days later.

It was not what she wanted.

The books from the library gave them all they needed. Soon, the room was complete.

She came by again two weeks later, her shoes soundless on the hardwood floor.

"Please, just look around, it'll be good enough this time," he begged.

She frowned but did as she was asked.

Unmoved, she shook her head, her voice hollow. "No. I don't want this."

At the door, her body slammed into something hard. Invisible.

She tried to disappear but merely flickered.

"We are a family now."

The little girl wailed her grief.

END

IT SHALL BE DONE

THE BELL CHIMES. HAROLD LOOKS at the grandfather clock: 2pm. He risks a glance at the man sitting in his torn, overstuffed chair and the handsome guard handcuffed to a stainless steel briefcase flanking him. He had fifteen minutes to go.

He can do this.

Harold wipes the sweat from the back of his neck, swipes his hands along his pants. He sits on his trembling hands when he can't stop their shaking.

He can do this.

To his right in the cramped room, his computer is open to the page on Italian Villas for sale. He had found a real nice one near Lucca with a view of the mountains.

His lips curl at the corner just so.

He can do this.

His bags are packed, all he needs to do is load them into his old, rundown Pinto. All he has to do is make it through these last few minutes. Pretend he was something else for just a little bit longer.

He smiles lightly.

He can do this.

"So..."

Harold nearly jumps out of his skin. He had zoned out just that fast. His mind on the helicopter rides they have planned, visiting the multiple small islands in the Bahamas. Maybe he'll even propose.

He offers the man a full blown smile, tilts his head to glean a covert reading of the time. Ten minutes to go. His leg bounces, giddily.

His heart beats frantically in anticipation of the fulfillment of a lifetime dream.

He can do this.

"Yes? I'm sorry, Mr....?"

"Dr. Berkley."

"Yes, Dr. Berkley?"

The man leans over in the chair, a tuff of dingy cotton pokes out just a bit further. Harold can smell the pompousness seeping from his pores, see his reflection in his spectacles. The guard smirks at him.

"All this money you're about to come in to, do you think it'll make you different?"

Harold startles, taken unawares by the question. His smile fades. His heartbeat slows. His leg stills.

"What?"

"The money…do you think it'll make you a better person?"

The man struggles to get out of the chair, finally finds his feet and braces himself against the chair arms to push up and out, nearly landing in Harold's lap. He ambles to the back of Harold's seat, pats his shoulder. Harold glances at the guard watching them, stupefied. The guard frowns.

Dr. Berkley crouches down to eye level.

"You have one minute. Choose the straight and narrow, Harold." The man waves over the guard, passes Harold a pen.

Harold trades a stare with the doctor, understanding floods his eyes.

Yes, he can do this.

Harold hears the chiming of the clock…time's up.

"It's okay, Harold. We're gonna be so happy together," the guard says as he kisses Harold's neck on the way out the door.

The doctor's body lies bloody, slumped in the armchair, pen sticking out of his eye. A form pokes from his pocket.

Harold smiles, money in hand, lost in unrestricted love.

He did it.

END

SEEING RED

THE POLICE WERE HERE ONCE again - another murder. He dipped under the yellow caution tape before the cops could see him. The naked, dead body with the note nailed into the back of its head, lying on the sidewalk outside the doors helped a lot with that. The third one this month here.

The homeless man snuck around the corner to the dumpsters. The chic High Rise on Orchard Street has the best trash.

The man made sure he got there bright and early before the collectors and his street competition beat him to it. Guess he wouldn't have to worry about that today. He shook his head in sympathy.

That poor bastard.

Rummaging through the big container, he came upon all manner of the building occupants' wasteful lives: half-eaten expensive food, barely worn high-end shoes, a piece of valuable-looking jewelry (which he promptly slide into the pocket without the hole in it), and a leather wallet containing $20.

Today was a good day.

He scavenged all he could comfortably carry, was about to head back to his spot by the railroad tracks when a flash of color caught his eye.

He carefully stashed his take deeper into the alley, hidden from view.

Returning to the dumpster, he jumped back up and in, ducking when a cop walked by the alley entrance. Coast clear, he sorted through the trash and found what had captured his attention – a red tie.

Wiping the excess grime from it with a dirty hand, he held it up to his chest and looked down.

"Jackpot."

Stuffing it in his pants pocket, he climbed back out, picked up his things and headed home.

That evening in his makeshift tent surrounded by other unfortunates like himself, he tried on his find...admired himself in his broken hand mirror.

He felt authoritative in his new tie. Grand. Majestic, even. Red means power.

He smoothed his hand down the silky piece of fabric, wet his thumb in his mouth and used it to scrub out an outstanding stain.

Stepping out of his humble abode, he strolled around the camp, head held high as he verbally greeted all he met. And they all ogled him with their mouths' agape.

They followed behind him, dogged his every step, stared at him in awe, whispered excitedly amongst themselves about him, and gestured toward him. He was somebody in his new tie. Somebody important.

Tittering louder, the people approached him, circled him. A woman in tattered old clothes yelled angrily, "Another one! Just who the hell do you think you are? Give us peace! What, don't your kind ever get enough of slumming?"

Afraid and confused, he stumbled away.

The crowd gives chase. They push at him. He falls. They swarm.

Outside the swanky high rise, the naked body grows cold and stiff. The note attached reads: 'Stay With Your Own Kind!'

Further down the street, a life-weary man roots hopefully through a near-empty garbage can.

Inside the dumpster, the tie awaits.

END

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

BASIL QUARTERMAINE TOSSES THE NOTE to the floor, puffing along on the expensive exercise bike. "Hobbs!"

His manservant appears by his side. "Sir?"

"Is everything set?

"All is ready, sir. Randolph is on his way with your guest right now."

The actor jumps from the bike, tosses his wet, expensive Egyptian cotton towel toward his help, smacking him square in the face. Hobbs sighs, removes it disgustedly between two pinched fingers. His employer sprints for his ensuite, luxury bathroom.

"Is my-"

"I've just hung your attire on the rack by your bed, sir."

"Yes, I have to impress."

"Will there be anything else, sir?"

The actor yells from in the shower, agitated, "No. Now for heavens' sake, Hobbs, let me get ready."

The butler shakes his head wearily in acceptance.

Fifteen minutes later Basil impatiently watches out the window as his personal car pulls up in his long driveway. An unassuming man gets out. He looks around, awed by the expansive, beautifully landscaped lawn.

"Bring him in, Hobbs. Quickly before one of the neighbors see."

"Yes, sir." He hurries out, ushers in the smiling, excited man. Hobbs escorts him directly to his employer's office.

"Mr. Basil Quartermaine?

The actor, sitting in the soft leather chair, turns from behind his massive oak desk. Basil stands, goes to greet the man - he extends his hand, smiling hugely.

"Guilty as charged. And you are, let me see..." He takes the letter from the pocket of his custom-made suit, "ah yes, Mr. Cortland Peregrine-Spaulding, I presume."

"Why, yes I am." He blushes. "Thank you so much for having me here. But I have to ask and please don't take offence, sir."

"Basil."

"Basil. I'm sure you get thousands of letters every week. You're a legend. With all due respect, why did you invite *me* here?"

Basil goes behind his desk, hefts up a giant postal bag full of mail, and dumps it all on his desk. Some spills over onto the floor.

"You see these? Believe it or not, I read each and every piece. People love Basil Quartermaine, have for years. But the thing is, I'm not a very good actor. Do you know how I got discovered?"

Cortland shakes his head.

"I used to muck out horse stalls for the rich at the very country club of which I am now a member. A producer saw my name on the job board and took a shine to it because it sounded *pretentious*."

He saunters back in front of his desk, pulls out a small revolver out of his pocket.

"Your name sticks out like a sore thumb. Do you know what would happen to my career if tale of your snooty name ever hit the circuit? I'd lose my livelihood by the end of that day. I'm sorry my dear boy but you simply have to go."

Basil shoots Cortland, then sighs.

"Hobbs."

Hobbs enters, horrified. "My God, sir. This one got blood on your best suit."

Grateful, Basil preens.

END

SOCKKA TO HIM

SOCKKA FOUND HIM ON THE sixth day, 24 hours before laundry time. He was wrapped around a silk dress sock. More than a textural step up from the gym sock which she was.

She stares, heartbroken. "So, this is where you've been all this time? We get separated and you don't even try to make your way a few square inches back to me? Look at me, I think I've begun to go gray worrying about you!"

A drawer jerking open below theirs causes him to move closer to the thinner piece of shiny fiber.

"Don't act surprised, I didn't ask to be with you. We were thrown together because both of us had lost our original mates. Just look at yourself! You let your elastic go! You slouch all the time! And you're chock full of lint on the inside. Even Owner knows we don't belong together anymore, that's why he decided *not* to roll us together."

He stretches out, lazily.

"He brought a new pack, did you know? He's gonna pair me with one of the younger ones after a while...and. I. can't. wait! He'll probably use you for cleaning."

Sockka pills that night, more than when she lost her original mate to the black hole of the laundry's wonky washing machine. She pills until she looks fluffy but she also makes a clear decision. She spends the night rubbing up against any fabrics that come her way when Owner yanks open any drawer of the dresser.

Later the next evening when Owner reaches in her drawer, Sockka makes her move. Static cling build-up allows her to attach herself to the underside of his sweater. She drops to his pants leg, holds on for dear life throughout the elevator ride down to the laundry room.

Once inside, she falls off, lands by the foot of a woman as she accidently drops an armful of clothes to the floor removing them from the dryer.

Mingling with the other clean clothes, she's scooped up and dumped haphazardly into a basket without being sorted, on her way to her new life.

A MONTH LATER

Sockka grins at her mate, happy in a committed, mix-matched relationship with a woolly new mate, beloved pair of comfort socks to one that spoils them

obsessively.

New Owner stands with her feet together, feeding coins into her machine, it's there that she spots him under a washing machine. Dirty, holey, frayed, lying wasted in a puddle of bleach. He was soaking it - a slave shackled to his constraining addiction.

He sees her, croaks out hoarsely, "Sockka…"

Owner turns away, heads for the elevator.

The next morning, Sockka hears, while relaxing on the puffy ottoman in front of the television, her Owner speak over the phone that due to complaints, a cleaning crew had went through the laundry room thoroughly last night after she'd started her wash.

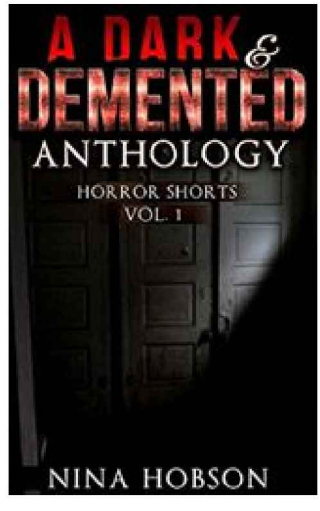
All unclaimed clothes had been put into a commercial plastic bag and thrown into the building's garbage incinerator.

END

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SEE MORE AT NINA HOBSON'S AUTHOR PAGE

The Shunned House

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

A posthumous story of immense power, written by a master of weird fiction—a tale of a revolting horror in the cellar of an old house in New England

FROM even the greatest of horrors irony is seldom absent. Sometimes it enters directly into the composition of the events, while sometimes it relates only to their fortuitous position among persons and places. The latter sort is splendidly exemplified by a case in the ancient city of Providence, where in the late forties Edgar Allan Poe used to sojourn often during his unsuccessful wooing of the gifted poetess, Mrs. Whitman. Poe generally stopped at the Mansion House in Benefit Street—the renamed Golden Ball Inn whose roof has sheltered Washington, Jefferson, and Lafayette—and his favorite walk led northward along the same street to Mrs. Whitman's home and the neighboring hillside churchyard of St. John's, whose hidden expanse of Eighteenth Century gravestones had for him a peculiar fascination.

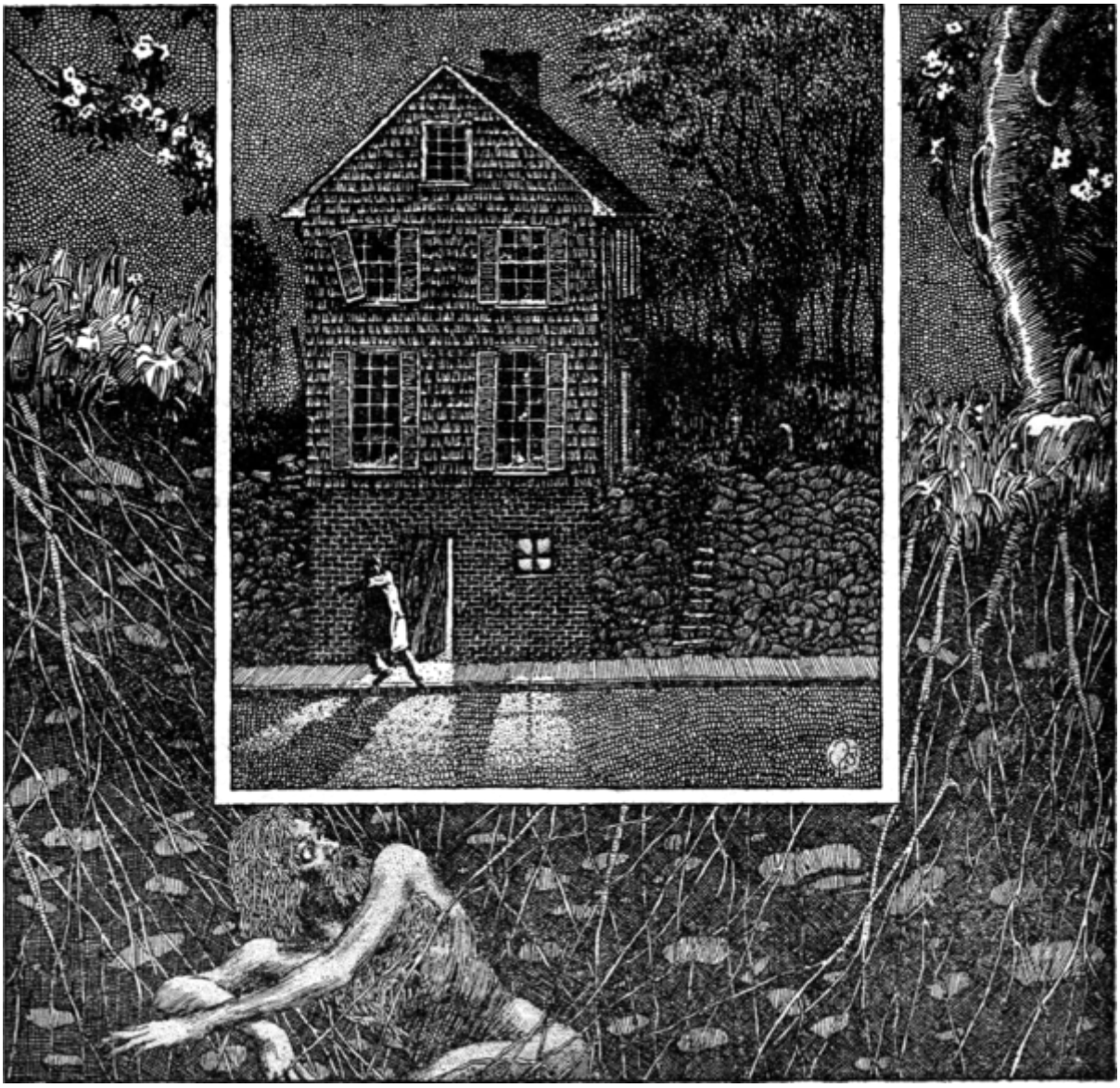
• Howard Phillips Lovecraft died last March, at the height of his career. Though only forty-six years of age, he had built up an international reputation by the artistry and impeccable literary craftsmanship of his weird tales; and he was regarded on both sides of the Atlantic as probably the greatest contemporary master of weird fiction. His ability to create and sustain a mood of brooding dread and unnamable horror is nowhere better shown than in the posthumous tale presented here: "The Shunned House."

Now the irony is this. In this walk, so many times repeated, the world's greatest master of the terrible and the bizarre was obliged to pass a particular house on the eastern side of the street; a dingy, antiquated structure perched on the abruptly rising side hill, with a great unkempt yard dating from a time when the region was partly open country. It does not appear that he ever wrote or spoke of it, nor is there any evidence that he even noticed it. And yet that house, to the two persons in possession of certain information, equals or outranks in horror the wildest fantasy of the genius who so often passed it unknowingly, and stands starkly leering as a symbol of all that is unutterably hideous.

The house was—and for that matter still is—of a kind to attract the attention of the curious. Originally a farm or semi-farm building, it followed the average New England colonial lines of the middle Eighteenth Century—the prosperous peaked-roof sort, with two stories and dormerless attic, and with the Georgian doorway and interior panelling dictated by the progress of taste at that time. It faced south, with one gable end buried to the lower windows in the eastward rising hill, and the other exposed to the foundations toward the street. Its construction, over a century and a half ago, had followed

the grading andstraightening of the road in that especial vicinity; for Benefit Street—at first called Back Street—was laid out as a lane winding amongst the graveyards of the first settlers, and straightened only when the removal of the bodies to the North Burial Ground made it decently possible to cut through the old family plots.

At the start, the western wall had lain some twenty feet up a precipitous lawn from the roadway; but a widening of the street at about the time of the Revolution sheared off most of the intervening space, exposing the foundations so that a brick basement wall had to be made, giving the deep cellar a street frontage with door and one window above ground, close to the new line of public travel. When the sidewalk was laid out a century ago the last of the intervening space was removed; and Poe in his walks must have seen only a sheer ascent of dull gray brick flush with the sidewalk and surmounted at a height of ten feet by the antique shingled bulk of the house proper.



"That awful door in Benefit Street which I had left ajar."

The farm-like ground extended back very deeply up the hill, almost to Wheaton Street. The space south of the house, abutting on Benefit Street, was of course greatly above the existing sidewalk level, forming a terrace bounded by a high bank wall of damp, mossy stone pierced by a steep flight of narrow steps which led inward between canyon-like surfaces to the upper region of mangy lawn, rheumy brick walks, and neglected gardens

whose dismantled cement urns, rusted kettles fallen from tripods of knotty sticks, and similar paraphernalia set off the weather-beaten front door with its broken fanlight, rotting Ionic pilasters, and wormy triangular pediment.

WHAT I heard in my youth about the shunned house was merely that people died there in alarmingly great numbers. That, I was told, was why the original owners had moved out some twenty years after building the place. It was plainly unhealthy, perhaps because of the dampness and fungous growths in the cellar, the general sickish smell, the drafts of the hallways, or the quality of the well and pump water. These things were bad enough, and these were all that gained belief among the persons whom I knew. Only the notebooks of my antiquarian uncle, Doctor Elihu Whipple, revealed to me at length the darker, vaguer surmises which formed an undercurrent of folklore among old-time servants and humble folk; surmises which never travelled far, and which were largely forgotten when Providence grew to be a metropolis with a shifting modern population.

The general fact is, that the house was never regarded by the solid part of the community as in any real sense "haunted." There were no widespread tales of rattling chains, cold currents of air, extinguished lights, or faces at the window. Extremists sometimes said the house was "unlucky," but that is as far as even they went. What was really beyond dispute is that a frightful proportion of persons died there; or more accurately, had died there, since after some peculiar happenings over sixty years ago the building had become deserted through the sheer impossibility of renting it. These persons were not all cut off suddenly by any one cause; rather did it seem that their vitality was insidiously sapped, so that each one died the sooner from whatever tendency to weakness he may have naturally had. And those who did not die displayed in varying degree a type of anemia or consumption, and sometimes a decline of the mental faculties, which spoke ill for the salubriousness of the building. Neighboring houses, it must be added, seemed entirely free from the noxious quality.

This much I knew before my insistent questioning led my uncle to show me the notes which finally embarked us both on our hideous investigation. In my childhood the shunned house was vacant, with barren, gnarled and terrible old trees, long, queerly pale grass and nightmarishly misshapen weeds in the high terraced yard where birds never lingered. We boys used to overrun the place, and I can still recall my youthful terror not only at the morbid strangeness of this sinister vegetation, but at the eldritch atmosphere and odor of the dilapidated house, whose unlocked front door was often entered in quest of shudders. The small-paned windows were largely broken, and a nameless air of desolation hung round the precarious panelling, shaky interior shutters, peeling wall-paper, falling plaster, rickety staircases, and such fragments of battered furniture as still remained. The dust and cobwebs added their touch of the fearful; and brave indeed was the boy who would voluntarily ascend the ladder to the attic, a vast raftered length lighted only by small blinking windows in the gable ends, and filled with a massed wreckage of chests, chairs, and spinning-wheels which infinite years of deposit had shrouded and festooned into monstrous and hellish shapes.

But after all, the attic was not the most terrible part of the house. It was the dank, humid cellar which somehow exerted the strongest repulsion on us, even though it was wholly above ground on the street side, with only a thin door and window-pierced brick wall to separate it from the busy sidewalk. We scarcely knew whether to haunt it in spectral fascination, or to shun it for the sake of our souls and our sanity. For one thing, the bad odor of the house was strongest there; and for another thing, we did not like the white

fungous growths which occasionally sprang up in rainy summer weather from the hard earth floor. Those fungi, grotesquely like the vegetation in the yard outside, were truly horrible in their outlines; detestable parodies of toadstools and Indian-pipes, whose like we had never seen in any other situation. They rotted quickly, and at one stage became slightly phosphorescent; so that nocturnal passers-by sometimes spoke of witch-fires glowing behind the broken panes of the fetor-spreading windows.

We never—even in our wildest Halloween moods—visited this cellar by night, but in some of our daytime visits could detect the phosphorescence, especially when the day was dark and wet. There was also a subtler thing we often thought we detected—a very strange thing which was, however, merely suggestive at most. I refer to a sort of cloudy whitish pattern on the dirt floor—a vague, shifting deposit of mold or niter which we sometimes thought we could trace amidst the sparse fungous growths near the huge fireplace of the basement kitchen. Once in a while it struck us that this patch bore an uncanny resemblance to a doubled-up human figure, though generally no such kinship existed, and often there was no whitish deposit whatever.

On a certain rainy afternoon when this illusion seemed phenomenally strong, and when, in addition, I had fancied I glimpsed a kind of thin, yellowish, shimmering exhalation rising from the nitrous pattern toward the yawning fireplace, I spoke to my uncle about the matter. He smiled at this odd conceit, but it seemed that his smile was tinged with reminiscence. Later I heard that a similar notion entered into some of the wild ancient tales of the common folk—a notion likewise alluding to ghoulish, wolfish shapes taken by smoke from the great chimney, and queer contours assumed by certain of the sinuous tree-roots that thrust their way into the cellar through the loose foundation-stones.

2

Not till my adult years did my uncle set before me the notes and data which he had collected concerning the shunned house. Doctor Whipple was a sane, conservative physician of the old school, and for all his interest in the place was not eager to encourage young thoughts toward the abnormal. His own view, postulating simply a building and location of markedly unsanitary qualities, had nothing to do with abnormality; but he realized that the very picturesqueness which aroused his own interest would in a boy's fanciful mind take on all manner of gruesome imaginative associations.

The doctor was a bachelor; a white-haired, clean-shaven, old-fashioned gentleman, and a local historian of note, who had often broken a lance with such controversial guardians of tradition as Sidney S. Rider and Thomas W. Bicknell. He lived with one man-servant in a Georgian homestead with knocker and iron-railed steps, balanced eerily on the steep ascent of North Court Street beside the ancient brick court and colony house where his grandfather—a cousin of that celebrated privateersman, Captain Whipple, who burnt His Majesty's armed schooner *Gaspee* in 1772—had voted in the legislature on May 4, 1776, for the independence of the Rhode Island Colony. Around him in the damp, low-ceiled library with the musty white panelling, heavy carved overmantel and small-paned, vine-shaded windows, were the relics and records of his ancient family, among which were many dubious allusions to the shunned house in Benefit Street. That pest spot lies not far distant—for Benefit runs ledgewise just above the court house along the precipitous hill up which the first settlement climbed.

When, in the end, my insistent pestering and maturing years evoked from my uncle the hoarded lore I sought, there lay before me a strange enough chronicle. Long-winded, statistical, and drearily genealogical as some of the matter was, there ran through it a continuous thread of brooding, tenacious horror and preternatural malevolence which impressed me even more than it had impressed the good doctor. Separate events fitted together uncannily, and seemingly irrelevant details held mines of hideous possibilities. A new and burning curiosity grew in me, compared to which my boyish curiosity was feeble and inchoate.

The first revelation led to an exhaustive research, and finally to that shuddering quest which proved so disastrous to myself and mine. For at the last my uncle insisted on joining the search I had commenced, and after a certain night in that house he did not come away with me. I am lonely without that gentle soul whose long years were filled only with honor, virtue, good taste, benevolence, and learning. I have reared a marble urn to his memory in St. John's churchyard—the place that Poe loved—the hidden grove of giant willows on the hill, where tombs and headstones huddle quietly between the hoary bulk of the church and the houses and bank walls of Benefit Street.

The history of the house, opening amidst a maze of dates, revealed no trace of the sinister either about its construction or about the prosperous and honorable family who built it. Yet from the first a taint of calamity, soon increased to boding significance, was apparent. My uncle's carefully compiled record began with the building of the structure in 1763, and followed the theme with an unusual amount of detail. The shunned house, it seems, was first inhabited by William Harris and his wife Rhoby Dexter, with their children, Elkanah, born in 1755, Abigail, born in 1757, William, Jr., born in 1759, and Ruth, born in 1761. Harris was a substantial merchant and seaman in the West India trade, connected with the firm of Obadiah Brown and his nephews. After Brown's death in 1761, the new firm of Nicholas Brown & Company made him master of the brig *Prudence*, Providence-built, of 120 tons, thus enabling him to erect the new homestead he had desired ever since his marriage.

The site he had chosen—a recently straightened part of the new and fashionable Back Street, which ran along the side of the hill above crowded Cheapside—was all that could be wished, and the building did justice to the location. It was the best that moderate means could afford, and Harris hastened to move in before the birth of a fifth child which the family expected. That child, a boy. came in December; but was stillborn. Nor was any child to be born alive in that house for a century and a half.

The next April, sickness occurred among the children, and Abigail and Ruth died before the month was over. Doctor Job Ives diagnosed the trouble as some infantile fever, though others declared it was more of a mere wasting-away or decline. It seemed, in any event, to be contagious; for Hannah Bowen, one of the two servants, died of it in the following June. Eli Lideason, the other servant, constantly complained of weakness; and would have returned to his father's farm in Rehoboth but for a sudden attachment for Mehitabel Pierce, who was hired to succeed Hannah. He died the next year—a sad year indeed, since it marked the death of William Harris himself, enfeebled as he was by the climate of Martinique, where his occupation had kept him for considerable periods during the preceding decade.

The widowed Rhoby Harris never recovered from the shock of her husband's death, and the passing of her first-born Elkanah two years later was the final blow to her reason. In 1768 she fell victim to a mild form of insanity, and was thereafter confined to the upper part

of the house; her elder maiden sister, Mercy Dexter, having moved in to take charge of the family. Mercy was a plain, raw-boned woman of great strength; but her health visibly declined from the time of her advent. She was greatly devoted to her unfortunate sister, and had an especial affection for her only surviving nephew William, who from a sturdy infant had become a sickly, spindling lad. In this year the servant Mehitabel died, and the other servant, Preserved Smith, left without coherent explanation—or at least, with only some wild tales and a complaint that he disliked the smell of the place. For a time Mercy could secure no more help, since the seven deaths and case of madness, all occurring within five years' space, had begun to set in motion the body of fireside rumor which later became so bizarre. Ultimately, however, she obtained new servants from out of town; Ann White, a morose woman from that part of North Kingstown now set off as the township of Exeter, and a capable Boston man named Zenas Low.

It was Ann White who first gave definite shape to the sinister idle talk. Mercy should have known better than to hire anyone from the Nooseneck Hill country, for that remote bit of backwoods was then, as now, a seat of the most uncomfortable superstitions. As lately as 1892 an Exeter community exhumed a dead body and ceremoniously burnt its heart in order to prevent certain alleged visitations injurious to the public health and peace, and one may imagine the point of view of the same section in 1768. Ann's tongue was perniciously active, and within a few months Mercy discharged her, filling her place with a faithful and amiable Amazon from Newport, Maria Robbins.

Meanwhile poor Rhoby Harris, in her madness, gave voice to dreams and imaginings of the most hideous sort. At times her screams became insupportable, and for long periods she would utter shrieking horrors which necessitated her son's temporary residence with his cousin, Peleg Harris, in Presbyterian Lane near the new college building. The boy would seem to improve after these visits, and had Mercy been as wise as she was well-meaning, she would have let him live permanently with Peleg. Just what Mrs. Harris cried out in her fits of violence, tradition hesitates to say; or rather, presents such extravagant accounts that they nullify themselves through sheer absurdity. Certainly it sounds absurd to hear that a woman educated only in the rudiments of French often shouted for hours in a coarse and idiomatic form of that language, or that the same person, alone and guarded, complained wildly of a staring thing which bit and chewed at her. In 1772 the servant Zenas died, and when Mrs. Harris heard of it she laughed with a shocking delight utterly foreign to her. The next year she herself died, and was laid to rest in the North Burial Ground beside her husband.

Upon the outbreak of trouble with Great Britain in 1775. William Harris, despite his scant sixteen years and feeble constitution, managed to enlist in the Army of Observation under General Greene; and from that time on enjoyed a steady rise in health and prestige. In 1780, as a captain in the Rhode Island forces in New Jersey under Colonel Angell, he met and married Phebe Hetfield of Elizabeth town, whom he brought to Providence upon his honorable discharge in the following year.

The young soldier's return was not a thing of unmitigated happiness. The house, it is true, was still in good condition; and the street had been widened and changed in name from Back Street to Benefit Street. But Mercy Dexter's once robust frame had undergone a sad and curious decay, so that she was now a stooped and pathetic figure with hollow voice and disconcerting pallor—qualities shared to a singular degree by the one remaining servant Maria. In the autumn of 1782 Phebe Harris gave birth to a still-born daughter, and

on the fifteenth of the next May Mercy Dexter took leave of a useful, austere, and virtuous life.

William Harris, at last thoroughly convinced of the radically unhealthful nature of his abode, now took steps toward quitting it and closing it for ever. Securing temporary quarters for himself and his wife at the newly opened Golden Ball Inn, he arranged for the building of a new and finer house in Westminster Street, in the growing part of the town across the Great Bridge. There, in 1785, his son Dutee was born; and there the family dwelt till the encroachments of commerce drove them back across the river and over the hill to Angell Street, in the newer East Side residence district, where the late Archer Harris built his sumptuous but hideous French-roofed mansion in 1876. William and Phebe both succumbed to the yellow fever epidemic of 1797, but Dutee was brought up by his cousin Rathbone Harris, Peleg's son.

Rathbone was a practical man, and rented the Benefit Street house despite William's wish to keep it vacant. He considered it an obligation to his ward to make the most of all the boy's property, nor did he concern himself with the deaths and illnesses which caused so many changes of tenants, or the steadily growing aversion with which the house was generally regarded. It is likely that he felt only vexation when, in 1804, the town council ordered him to fumigate the place with sulfur, tar, and gum camphor on account of the much-discussed deaths of four persons, presumably caused by the then diminishing fever epidemic. They said the place had a febrile smell.

Dutee himself thought little of the house, for he grew up to be a privateersman, and served with distinction on the *Vigilant* under Captain Cahoone in the War of 1812. He returned unharmed, married in 1814, and became a father on that memorable night of September 23, 1815, when a great gale drove the waters of the bay over half the town, and floated a tall sloop well up Westminster Street so that its masts almost tapped the Harris windows in symbolic affirmation that the new boy, Welcome, was a seaman's son.

Welcome did not survive his father, but lived to perish gloriously at Fredericksburg in 1862. Neither he nor his son Archer knew of the shunned house as other than a nuisance almostimpossible to rent—perhaps on account of the mustiness and sickly odor of unkempt old age. Indeed, it never was rented after a series of deaths culminating in 1861, which the excitement of the war tended to throw into obscurity. Carrington Harris, last of the male line, knew it only as a deserted and somewhat picturesque center of legend until I told him my experience. He had meant to tear it down and build an apartment house on the site, but after my account decided to let it stand, install plumbing, and rent it. Nor has he yet had any difficulty in obtaining tenants. The horror has gone.

3

IT MAY well be imagined how powerfully I was affected by the annals of the Harrises. In this continuous record there seemed to me to brood a persistent evil beyond anything in nature as I had known it; an evil clearly connected with the house and not with the family. This impression was confirmed by my uncle's less systematic array of miscellaneous data—legends transcribed from servant gossip, cuttings from the papers, copies of death certificates by fellow-physicians, and the like. All of this material I cannot hope to give, for my uncle was a tireless antiquarian and very deeply interested in the shunned house; but I may refer to several dominant points which earn notice by their

recurrence through many reports from diverse sources. For example, the servant gossip was practically unanimous in attributing to the fungous and malodorous *cellar* of the house a vast supremacy in evil influence. There had been servants—Ann White especially—who would not use the cellar kitchen, and at least three well-defined legends bore upon the queer quasi-human or diabolic outlines assumed by tree-roots and patches of mold in that region. These latter narratives interested me profoundly, on account of what I had seen in my boyhood, but I felt that most of the significance had in each case been largely obscured by additions from the common stock of local ghost lore.

Ann White, with her Exeter superstition, had promulgated the most extravagant and at the same time most consistent tale; alleging that there must lie buried beneath the house one of those vampires—the dead who retain their bodily form and live on the blood or breath of the living—whose hideous legions send their preying shapes or spirits abroad by night. To destroy a vampire one must, the grandmothers say, exhume it and burn its heart, or at least drive a stake through that organ; and Ann's dogged insistence on a search under the cellar had been prominent in bringing about her discharge.

Her tales, however, commanded a wide audience, and were the more readily accepted because the house indeed stood on land once used for burial purposes. To me their interest depended less on this circumstance than on the peculiarly appropriate way in which they dovetailed with certain other things—the complaint of the departing servant Preserved Smith, who had preceded Ann and never heard of her, that something "sucked his breath" at night; the death-certificates of the fever victims of 1804, issued by Doctor Chad Hopkins, and showing the four deceased persons all unaccountably lacking in blood; and the obscure passages of poor Rhoby Harris's ravings, where she complained of the sharp teeth of a glassy-eyed, half-visible presence.

Free from unwarranted superstititionthough I am, these things produced in me an odd sensation, which was intensified by a pair of widely separated newspaper cuttings relating to deaths in the shunned house—one from the *ProvidenceGazette and Country-Journal* of April 12, 1815, and the other from the *Daily Transcript and Chronicle* of October 27, 1845—each of which detailed an appallingly grisly circumstance whose duplication was remarkable. It seems that in both instances the dying person, in 1815 a gentle old lady named Stafford and in 1845 a schoolteacher of middle age named Eleazar Durfee, became transfigured in a horrible way, glaring glassily and attempting to bite the throat of the attending physician. Even more puzzling, though, was the final case which put an end to the renting of the house—a series of anemia deaths preceded by progressive madnesses wherein the patient would craftily attempt the lives of his relatives by incisions in the neck or wrist.

This was in 1860 and 1861, when my uncle had just begun his medical practise; and before leaving for the front he heard much of it from his elder professional colleagues. The really inexplicable thing was the way in which the victims—ignorant people, for the ill-smelling and widely shunned house could now be rented to no others—would babble maledictions in French, a language they could not possibly have studied to any extent. It made one think of poor Rhoby Harris nearly a century before, and so moved my uncle that he commenced collecting historical data on the house after listening, some time subsequent to his return from the war, to the first-hand account of Doctors Chase and Whitmarsh. Indeed, I could see that my uncle had thought deeply on the subject, and that he was glad of my own interest—an open-minded and sympathetic interest which enabled him to discuss with me matters at which others would merely have laughed. His fancy had

not gone so far as mine, but he felt that the place was rare in its imaginative potentialities, and worthy of note as an inspiration in the field of the grotesque and macabre.

For my part, I was disposed to take the whole subject with profound seriousness, and began at once not only to review the evidence, but to accumulate as much more as I could. I talked with the elderly Archer Harris, then owner of the house, many times before his death in 1916; and obtained from him and his still surviving maiden sister Alice an authentic corroboration of all the family data my uncle had collected. When, however, I asked them what connection with France or its language the house could have, they confessed themselves as frankly baffled and ignorant as I. Archer knew nothing, and all that Miss Harris could say was that an old allusion her grandfather, Dutee Harris, had heard of might have shed a little light. The old seaman, who had survived his son Welcome's death in battle by two years, had not himself known the legend, but recalled that his earliest nurse, the ancient Maria Robbins, seemed darkly aware of something that might have lent a weird significance to the French raving of Rhoby Harris, which she had so often heard during the last days of that hapless woman. Maria had been at the shunned house from 1769 till the removal of the family in 1783, and had seen Mercy Dexter die. Once she hinted to the child Dutee of a somewhat peculiar circumstance in Mercy's last moments, but lie had soon forgotten all about it save that it was something peculiar. The granddaughter, moreover, recalled even this much with difficulty. She and her brother were not so much interested in the house as was Archer's son Carrington, the present owner, with whom I talked after my experience.

HAVING exhausted the Harris family of all the information it could furnish, I turned my attention to early town records and deeds with a zeal more penetrating than that which my uncle had occasionally shown in the same work. What I wished was a comprehensive history of the site from its very settlement in 1636—or even before, if any Narragansett Indian legend could be unearthed to supply the data. I found, at the start, that the land had been part of the long strip of home lot granted originally to John Throckmorton; one of many similar strips beginning at the Town Street beside the river and extending up over the hill to a line roughly corresponding with the modern Hope Street. The Throckmorton lot had later, of course, been much subdivided; and I became very assiduous in tracing that section through which Back or Benefit Street was later run. It had, as rumor indeed said, been the Throckmorton graveyard; but as I examined the records more carefully, I found that the graves had all been transferred at an early date to the North Burial Ground on the Pawtucket West Road.

Then suddenly I came—by a rare piece of chance, since it was not in the main body of records and might easily have been missed— upon something which aroused my keenest eagerness, fitting in as it did with several of the queerest phases of the affair. It was the record of a lease, in 1697, of a small tract of ground to an Etienne Roulet and wife. At last the French element had appeared—that, and another deeper element of horror which the name conjured up from the darkest recesses of my weird and heterogeneous reading—and I feverishly studied the platting of the locality as it had been before the cutting through and partial straightening of Back Street between 1747 and 1758. I found what I had half expected, that where the shunned house now stood the Roulets had laid out their graveyard behind a one-story and attic cottage, and that no record of any transfer of graves existed, document, indeed, ended in much confusion; and I was forced to ransack both the Rhode Island Historical Society and Shepley Library before I could find a local door which the name of Etienne Roulet would unlock. In the end I did find something;

something of such vague but monstrous import that I set about at once to examine the cellar of the shunned house itself with a new and excited minuteness.

The Roulets, it seemed, had come in 1696 from East Greenwich, down the west shore of Narragansett Bay. They were Huguenots from Canude, and had encountered much opposition before the Providence selectmen allowed them to settle in the town. Unpopularity had dogged them in East Greenwich, whither they had come in 1686, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and rumor said that the cause of dislike extended beyond mere racial and national prejudice, or the land disputes which involved other French settlers with the English in rivalries which not even Governor Andros could quell. But their ardent Protestantism—too ardent, some whispered—and their evident distress when virtually driven from the village down the bay, had moved the sympathy of the town fathers. Here the strangers had been granted a haven; and the swarthy Etienne Roulet, less apt at agriculture than at reading queer books and drawing queer diagrams, was given a clerical post in the warehouse at Pardon Tillinghast's wharf, far south in Town Street. There had, however, been a riot of some sort later on—perhaps forty years later, after old Roulet's death—and no one seemed to hear of the family after that.

For a century and more, it appeared, the Roulets had been well remembered and frequently discussed as vividincidents in the quiet life of a New England seaport. Etienne's son Paul, a surly fellow whose erratic conduct had probably provoked the riot which wiped out the family, was particularly a source of speculation; and though Providence never shared the witchcraft panics of her Puritan neighbors, it was freely intimated by old wives that his prayers were neither uttered at the proper time nor directed toward the proper object. All this had undoubtedly formed the basis of the legend known by old Maria Robbins. What relation it had to the French ravings of Rhoby Harris and other inhabitants of the shunned house, imagination or future discovery alone could determine. I wondered how many of those who had known the legends realized that additional link with the terrible which my wider reading had given me; that ominous item in the annals of morbid horror whiichtells of the creature *Jacques Roulet, of Caude*, who in 1598 was condemned to death as a demoniac but afterward saved from the stake by the Paris parliament and shut in a madhouse. He had been found covered with blood and shreds of flesh in a wood, shortly after the killing and rending of a boy by a pair of wolves. One wolf was seen to lope away unhurt. Surely a pretty hearthside tale, with a queer significance as to name and place; but I decided that the Providence gossips could not have generally known of it. Had they known, the coincidence of names would have brought some drastic and frightened action—indeed, might not its limited whispering have precipitated the final riot which erased the Roulets from the town?

I now visited the accursed place with increased frequency; studying the unwholesome vegetation of the garden, examining all the walls of the building, and poring over every inch of the earthen cellar floor. Finally, with Carrington Harris's permission, I fitted a key to the disused door opening from the cellar directly upon Benefit Street, preferring to have a more immediate access to the outside world than the dark stairs, ground-floor hall, and front door could give. There, where morbidity lurked most thickly, I searched and poked during long afternoons when the sunlight filtered in through the cobwebbed above-ground windows, and a sense of security glowed from the unlocked door which placed me only a few feet from the placid sidewalk outside. Nothing new rewarded my efforts—only the same depressing mustiness and faint suggestions of noxious odors and nitrous outlines

on the floor—and I fancy that many pedestrians must have watched me curiously through the broken panes.

At length, upon a suggestion of my uncle's, I decided to try the spot nocturnally; and one stormy midnight ran the beams of an electric torch over the moldy floor with its uncanny shapes and distorted, half-phosphorescent fungi. The place had dispirited me curiously that evening, and I was almost prepared when I saw—or thought I saw—amidst the whitish deposits a particularly sharp definition of the "huddled form" I had suspected from boyhood. Its clearness was astonishing and unprecedented—and as I watched I seemed to see again the thin, yellowish, shimmering exhalation which had startled me on that rainy afternoon so many years before.

Above the anthropomorphic patch of mold by the fireplace it rose; a subtle, sickish, almost luminous vapor which as it hung trembling in the dampness seemed to develop vague and shocking suggestions of form, gradually trailing off into nebulous decay and passing up into the blackness of the great chimney with a fetor in its wake. It was truly horrible, and the more so to me because of what I knew of the spot. Refusing to flee, I watched it fade—and as I watched I felt that it was in turn watching me greedily with eyes more imaginable than visible. When I told my uncle about it he was greatly aroused; and after a tense hour of reflection, arrived at a definite and drastic decision. Weighing in his mind the importance of the matter, and the significance of our relation to it, he insisted that we both test—and if possible destroy—the horror of the house by a joint night or nights of aggressive vigil in that musty and fungus-cursed cellar.

4

On Wednesday, June 25, 1919, after a proper notification of Carrington Harris which did not include surmises as to what we expected to find, my uncle and I conveyed to the shunned house two camp chairs and a folding camp cot, together with some scientific mechanism of greater weight and intricacy. These we placed in the cellar during the day, screening the windows with paper and planning to return in the evening for our first vigil. We had locked the door from the cellar to the ground floor; and having a key to the outside cellar door, were prepared to leave our expensive and delicate apparatus—which we had obtained secretly and at great cost—as many days as our vigils might be protracted. It was our design to sit up together till very late, and then watch singly till dawn in two-hour stretches, myself first and then my companion; the inactive member resting on the cot.

The natural leadership with which my uncle procured the instruments from the laboratories of Brown University and the Cranston Street Armory, and instinctively assumed direction of our venture, was a marvelous commentary on the potential vitality and resilience of a man of eighty-one. Elihu Whipple had lived according to the hygienic laws he had preached as a physician, and but for what happened later would be here in full vigor today. Only two persons suspected what did happen—Carrington Harris and myself, I had to tell Harris because he owned the house and deserved to know what had gone out of it. Then too, we had spoken to him in advance of our quest; and I felt after my uncles going that he would understand and assist me in some vitally necessary public explanations. He turned very pale, but agreed to help me, and decided that it would now be safe to rent the house.

To declare that we were not nervous on that rainy night of watching would be an exaggeration both gross and ridiculous. We were not, as I have said, in any sense childishly superstitious, but scientific study and reflection had taught us that the known universe of three dimensions embraces the merest fraction of the whole cosmos of substance and energy. In this case an overwhelming preponderance of evidence from numerous authentic sources pointed to the tenacious existence" of certain forces of great power and, so far as the human point of view is concerned, exceptional malignancy. To say that we actually believed in vampires or werewolves would be a carelessly inclusive statement. Rather must it be said that we were not prepared to deny the possibility of certain unfamiliar and unclassified modifications of vital force and attenuated matter; existing very infrequently in three-dimensional space because of its more intimate connection with other spatial units, yet close enough to the boundary of our own to furnish us occasional manifestations which we, for lack of a proper vantage-point, may never hope to understand.

In short, it seemed to my uncle and me that an incontrovertible array of facts pointed to some lingering influence in the shunned house; traceable to one or another of the ill-favored French settlers of two centuries before, and still operative through rare and unknown laws of atomic and electronic motion. That the family of Roulet had possessed an abnormal affinity for outer circles of entity—dark spheres which for normal folk hold only repulsion and terror—their recorded history seemed to prove. Had not, then, the riots of those bygone seventeen-thirties set moving certain kinetic patterns in the morbid brain of one or more of them— notably the sinister Paul Roulet—which obscurely survived the bodies murdered and buried by the mob, and continued to function in some multiple-dimensioned space along the original lines of force determined by a frantic hatred of the encroaching community?

Such a thing was surely not a physical or biochemical impossibility in the light of a newer science which includes the theories of relativity and intra-atomic action. One might easily imagine an alien nucleus of substance or energy, formless or otherwise, kept alive by imperceptible or immaterial subtractions from the life-force or bodily tissue and fluids of other and more palpably living things into which it penetrates and with whose fabric it sometimes completely merges itself. It might be actively hostile, or it might be dictated merely by blind motives of self-preservation. In any case such a monster must of necessity be in our scheme of things an anomaly and an intruder, whose extirpation forms a primary duty with every man not an enemy to the world's life, health, and sanity.

What baffled us was our utter ignorance of the aspect in which we might encounter the thing. No sane person had ever seen it, and few had ever felt it definitely. It might be pure energy—a form ethereal and outside the realm of substance—or it might be partly material; some unknown and equivocal mass of plasticity, capable of changing at will to nebulous approximations of the solid, liquid, gaseous, or tenuously unparticled states. The anthropomorphic patch of mold on the floor, the form of the yellowish vapor, and the curvature of the tree-roots in some of the old tales, all argued at least a remote and reminiscent connection with the human shape; but how representative or permanent that similarity might be, none could say with any kind of certainty.

WE HAD devised two weapons to fight it; a large and specially fitted Crookes tube operated by powerful storage batteries and provided with peculiar screens and reflectors, in case it proved intangible and opposable only by vigorously destructive ether radiations, and a pair of military flame-throwers of the sort used in the World War, in

case it proved partly material and susceptible of mechanical destruction—for like the superstitious Exeter rustics, we were prepared to burn the thing's heart out if heart existed to burn. All this aggressive mechanism we set in the cellar in positions carefully arranged with reference to the cot and chairs, and to the spot before the fireplace where the mold had taken strange shapes. That suggestive patch, by the way, was only faintly visible when we placed our furniture and instruments, and when we returned that evening for the actual vigil. For a moment I half doubted that I had ever seen it in the more definitely limned form—but then I thought of the legends.

Our cellar vigil began at ten p. m., daylight saving time, and as it continued we found no promise of pertinent developments. A weak, filtered glow from the rain-harassed street-lamps outside, and a feeble phosphorescence from the detestable fungi within, showed the dripping stone of the walls, from which all traces of whitewash had vanished; the dank, fetid and mildew-tainted hard earth floor with its obscene fungi; the rotting remains of what had been stools, chairs, and tables, and other more shapeless furniture; the heavy planks and massive beams of the ground floor overhead; the decrepit plank door leading to bins and chambers beneath other parts of the house; the crumbling stone staircase with ruined wooden hand-rail; and the crude and cavernous fireplace of blackened brick where rusted iron fragments revealed the past presence of hooks, and irons, spit, crane, and a door to the Dutch oven—these things, and our austere cot and camp chairs, and the heavy and intricate destructive machinery we had brought.

We had, as in my own former explorations, left the door to the street unlocked; so that a direct and practical path of escape might lie open in case of manifestations beyond our power to deal with. It was our idea that our continued nocturnal presence would call forth whatever malign entity lurked there; and that being prepared, we could dispose of the thing with one or the other of our provided means as soon as we had recognized and observed it sufficiently. How long it might require to evoke and extinguish the thing, we had no notion. It occurred to us, too, that our venture was far from safe; for in what strength the thing might appear no one could tell. But we deemed the game worth the hazard, and embarked on it alone and unhesitatingly; conscious that the seeking of outside aid would only expose us to ridicule and perhaps defeat our entire purpose. Such was our frame of mind as we talked—far into the night, till my uncle's growing drowsiness made me remind him to lie down for his two-hour sleep.

Something like fear chilled me as I sat there in the small hours alone—I say alone, for one who sits by a sleeper is indeed alone; perhaps more alone than he can realize. My uncle breathed heavily, his deep inhalations and exhalations accompanied by the rain outside, and punctuated by another nerve—racking sound of distant dripping water within—for the house was repulsively damp even in dry weather, and in this storm positively swamp-like. I studied the loose, antique masonry of the walls in the fungus-light and the feeble rays which stole in from the street through the screened window; and once, when the noisome atmosphere of the place seemed about to sicken me, I opened the door and looked up and down the street, feasting my eyes on familiar sights and my nostrils on wholesome air. Still nothing occurred to reward my watching; and I yawned repeatedly, fatigue getting the better of apprehension.

Then the stirring of my uncle in his sleep attracted my notice. He had turned restlessly on the cot several times during the latter half of the first hour, but now he was breathing with unusual irregularity, occasionally heaving a sigh which held more than a few of the qualities of a choking moan.

I turned my electric flashlight on him and found his face averted; so rising and crossing to the other side of the cot, I again flashed the light to see if he seemed in any pain. What I saw unnerved me most surprizingly, considering its relative triviality. It must have been merely the association of any odd circumstance with the sinister nature of our location and mission, for surely the circumstance was not in itself frightful or unnatural. It was merely that my uncle's facial expression, disturbed no doubt by the strange dreams which our situation prompted, betrayed considerable agitation, and seemed not at all characteristic of him. His habitual expression was one of kindly and well-bred calm, whereas now a variety of emotions seemed struggling within him. I think, on the whole, that it was this variety which chiefly disturbed me. My uncle, as he gasped and tossed in increasing perturbation and with eyes that had now started open, seemed not one but many men, and suggested a curious quality of alienage from himself.

All at once he commenced to mutter, and I did not like the look of his mouth and teeth as he spoke. The words were at first indistinguishable, and then—with a tremendous start—I recognized something about them which filled me with icy fear till I recalled the breadth of my uncle's education and the interminable translations he had made from anthropological and antiquarian articles in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. For the venerable Elihu Whipple was muttering *in French*, and the few phrases I could distinguish seemed connected with the darkest myths he had ever adapted from the famous Paris magazine.

Suddenly a perspiration broke out on the sleeper's forehead, and he leaped abruptly up, half awake. The jumble of French changed to a cry in English, and the hoarse voice shouted excitedly, "My breath, my breath!" Then the awakening became complete, and with a subsidence of facial expression to the normal state my uncle seized my hand and began to relate a dream whose nucleus of significance I could only surmise with a kind of awe.

He had, he said, floated off from a very ordinary series of dream-pictures into a scene whose strangeness was related to nothing he had ever read. It was of this world, and yet not of it—a shadowy geometrical confusion in which could be seen elements of familiar things in most unfamiliar and perturbing combinations. There was a suggestion of queerly disordered pictures superimposed one upon another; an arrangement in which the essentials of time as well as of space seemed dissolved and mixed in the most illogical fashion. In this kaleidoscopic vortex of phantasmal images were occasional snap-shots, if one might use the term, of singular clearness but unaccountable heterogeneity.

Once my uncle thought he lay in a carelessly dug open pit, with a crowd of angry faces framed by straggling locks and three-cornered hats frowning down on him. Again he seemed to be in the interior of a house—an old house, apparently—but the details and inhabitants were constantly changing, and he could never be certain of the faces or the furniture, or even of the room itself, since doors and windows seemed in just as great a state of flux as the presumably more mobile objects. It was queer—damnably queer—and my uncle spoke almost sheepishly, as if half expecting not to be believed, when he declared that of the strange faces many had unmistakably borne the features of the Harris family. And all the while there was a personal sensation of choking, as if some pervasive presence had spread itself through his body and sought to possess itself of his vital processes.

I shuddered at the thought of those vital processes, worn as they were by eighty-one years of continuous functioning, in conflict with unknown forces of which the youngest and

strongest system might well be afraid; but in another moment reflected that dreams are only dreams, and that these uncomfortable visions could be, at most, no more than my uncle's reaction to the investigations and expectations which had lately filled our minds to the exclusion of all else.

Conversation, also, soon tended to dispel my sense of strangeness; and in time I yielded to my yawns and took my turn at slumber. My uncle seemed now very wakeful, and welcomed his period of watching even though the nightmare had aroused him far ahead of his alotted two hours.

Sleep seized me quickly, and I was at once haunted with dreams of the most disturbing kind. I felt, in my visions, a cosmic and abysmal loneness; with hostility surging from all sides upon some prison where I lay confined. I seemed bound and gagged, and taunted by the echoing yells of distant multitudes who thirsted for my blood. My uncle's face came to me with less pleasant association than in waking hours, and I recall many futile struggles and attempts to scream. It was not a pleasant sleep, and for a second I was not sorry for the echoing shriek which clove through the barriers of dream and flung me to a sharp and startled awakeness in which every actual object before my eyes stood out with more than natural clearness and reality.

5

I HAD been lying with my face away from my uncle's chair, so that in this sudden flash of awakening I saw only the door to the street, the window, and the wall and floor and ceiling toward the north of the room, all photographed with morbid vividness on my brain in a light brighter than the glow of the fungi or the rays from the street outside. It was not a strong or even a fairly strong light; certainly not nearly strong enough to read an average book by. But it cast a shadow of myself and the cot on the floor, and had a yellowish, penetrating force that hinted at things more potent than luminosity. This I perceived with unhealthy sharpness despite the fact that two of my other senses were violently assailed. For on my ears rang the reverberations of that shocking scream, while my nostrils revolted at the stench which filled the place. My mind, as alert as my senses, recognized the gravely unusual; and almost automatically I leaped up and turned about to grasp the destructive instruments which we had left trained on the moldy spot before the fireplace. As I turned, I dreaded what I was to see; for the scream had been in my uncle's voice, and I knew not against what menace I should have to defend him and myself.

Yet after all, the sight was worse than I had dreaded. There are horrors beyond horrors, and this was one of those nuclei of all dreamable hideousness which the cosmos saves to blast an accursed and unhappy few. Out of the fungus-ridden earth steamed up a vaporous corpse-light, yellow and diseased, which bubbled and lapped to a gigantic height in vague outlines half human and half monstrous, through which I could see the chimney and fireplace beyond. It was all eyes—wolfish and mocking—and the rugose insect-like head dissolved at the top to a thin stream of mist which curled putridly about and finally vanished up the chimney. I say that I saw this thing, but it is only in conscious retrospection that I ever definitely traced its damnable approach to form. At the time, it was to me only a seething, dimly phosphorescent cloud of fungous loathsomeness, enveloping and dissolving to an abhorrent plasticity the one object on which all my attention was focussed. That object was my uncle—the venerable Elihu Whipple—who with blackening

and decaying features leered and gibbered at me, and reached out dripping claws to rend me in the fury which this horror had brought.

It was a sense of routine which kept me from going mad. I had drilled myself in preparation for the crucial moment, and blind training saved me. Recognizing the bubbling evil as no substance reachable by matter or material chemistry, and therefore ignoring the flame-thrower which loomed on my left, I threw on the current of the Crookes tube apparatus, and focussed toward that scene of immortal blasphemousness the strongest ether radiations which man's art can arouse from the spaces and fluids of nature. There was a bluish haze and a frenzied sputtering, and the yellowish phosphorescence grew dimmer to my eyes. But I saw the dimness was only that of contrast, and that the waves from the machine had no effect whatever.

Then, in the midst of that demoniac spectacle, I saw a fresh horror which brought cries to my lips and sent me fumbling and staggering toward that unlocked door to the quiet street, careless of what abnormal terrors I loosed upon the world, or what thoughts or judgments of men I brought down upon my head. In that dim blend of blue and yellow the form of my uncle had commenced a nauseous liquefaction whose essence eludes all description, and in which there played across his vanishing face such changes of identity as only madness can conceive. He was at once a devil and a multitude, a charnel-house and a pageant. Lit by the mixed and uncertain beams, that gelatinous face assumed a dozen—a score—a hundred—aspects; grinning, as it sank to the ground on a body that melted like tallow, in the caricatured likeness of legions strange and yet not strange.

I saw the features of the Harris line, masculine and feminine, adult and infantile, and other features old and young, coarse and refined, familiar and unfamiliar. For a second there flashed a degraded counterfeit of a miniature of poor mad Rhoby Harris that I had seen in the School of Design museum, and another time I thought I caught the raw-boned image of Mercy Dexter as I recalled her from a painting in Carrington Harris's house. It was frightful beyond conception; toward the last, when a curious blend of servant and baby visages flickered close to the fungous floor where a pool of greenish grease was spreading, it seemed as though the shifting features fought against themselves and strove to form contours like those of my uncle's kindly face. I like to think that he existed at that moment, and that he tried to bid me farewell. It seems to me I hiccupped a farewell from my own parched throat as I lurched out into the street; a thin stream of grease following me through the door to the rain-drenched sidewalk.

THE rest is shadowy and monstrous. There was no one in the soaking street, and in all the world there was no one I dared tell. I walked aimlessly south past College Hill and the Athenæum, down Hopkins Street, and over the bridge to the business section where tall buildings seemed to guard me as modern material things guard the world from ancient and unwholesome wonder. Then gray dawn unfolded wetly from the east, silhouetting the archaic hill and its venerable steeples, and beckoning me to the place where my terrible work was still unfinished. And in the end I went, wet, hatless, and dazed in the morning light, and entered that awful door in Benefit Street which I had left ajar, and which still swung cryptically in full sight of the early householders to whom I dared not speak.

The grease was gone, for the moldy floor was porous. And in front of the fireplace was no vestige of the giantdoubled-up form traced in niter. I looked at the cot, the chairs, the instruments, my neglected hat, and the yellowed straw hat of my uncle. Dazedness was

uppermost, and I could scarcely recall what was dream and what was reality. Then thought trickled back, and I knew that I had witnessed things more horrible than I had dreamed.

Sitting down, I tried to conjecture as nearly as sanity would let me just what had happened, and how I might end the horror, if indeed it had been real. Matter it seemed not to be, nor ether, nor anything else conceivable by mortal mind. What, then, but some exotic *emanation;* some vampirish vapor such as Exeter rustics tell of as lurking over certain churchyards? This I felt was the clue, and again I looked at the floor before the fireplace where the mold and niter had taken strange forms.

In ten minutes my mind was made up, and taking my hat I set out for home, where I bathed, ate, and gave by telephone an order for a pickax, a spade, a military gas-mask, and six carboys of sulfuric acid, all to be delivered the next morning at the cellar door of the shunned house in Benefit Street. After that I tried to sleep; and failing, passed the hours in reading and in the composition of inane verses to counteract my mood.

At eleven a. m. the next day I commenced digging. It was sunny weather, and I was glad of that. I was still alone, for as much as I feared the unknown horror I sought, there was more fear in the thought of telling anybody. Later I told Harris only through sheer necessity, and because he had heard odd tales from old people which disposed him ever so little toward belief. As I turned up the stinking black earth in front of the fireplace, my spade causing a viscous yellow ichor to ooze from the white fungi which it severed, I trembled at the dubious thoughts of what I might uncover. Some secrets of inner earth are not good for mankind, and this seemed to me one of them.

My hand shook perceptibly, but still I delved; after a while standing in the large hole I had made. With the deepening of the hole, which was about six feet square, the evil smell increased; and I lost all doubt of my imminent contact with the hellish thing whose emanations had cursed the house for over a century and a half. I wondered what it would look like—what its form and substance would be, and how big it might have waxed through long ages of life-sucking. At length I climbed out of the hole and dispersed the heaped-up dirt, then arranging the great carboys of acid around and near two sides, so that when necessary I might empty them all down the aperture in quick succession. After that I dumped earth only along the other two sides; working more slowly and donning my gas-mask as the smell grew. I was nearly unnerved at my proximity to a nameless thing at the bottom of a pit.

Suddenly my spade struck something softer than earth. I shuddered, and made a motion as if to climb out of the hole, which was now as deep as my neck. Then courage returned, and I scraped away more dirt in the light of the electric torch I had provided. The surface I uncovered was fishy and glassy—a kind of semi-putrid congealed jelly with suggestions of translucency. I scraped further, and saw that it had form. There was a rift where a part of the substance was folded over. The exposed area was huge and roughly cylindrical; like a mammoth soft blue-white stovepipe doubled in two, its largest part some two feet in diameter. Still more I scraped, and then abruptly I leaped out of the hole and away from the filthy thing; frantically unstopping and tilting the heavy carboys, and precipitating their corrosive contents one after another down that charnel gulf and upon the unthinkable abnormality whose titan *elbow* I had seen.

THE blinding maelstrom of greenish-yellow vapor which surged tempestuously up from that hole as the floods of acid descended, will never leave my memory. All along the hill people tell of the yellow day, when virulent and horrible fumes arose from the

factory waste dumped in the Providence River, but I know how mistaken they are as to the source. They tell, too, of the hideous roar which at the same time came from some disordered water-pipe or gas main underground—but again I could correct them if I dared. It was unspeakably shocking, and I do not see how I lived through it. I did faint after emptying the fourth carboy, which I had to handle after the fumes had began to penetrate my mask; but when I recovered I saw that the hole was emitting no fresh vapors.

The two remaining carboys I emptied down without particular result, and after a time I felt it safe to shovel the earth back into the pit. It was twilight before I was done, but fear had gone out of the place. The dampness was less fetid, and all the strange fungi had withered to a kind of harmless grayish powder which blew ash-like along the floor. One of earth's nethermost terrors had perished for ever; and if there be a hell, it had received at last the demon soul of an unhallowed thing. And as I patted down the last spadeful of mold, I shed the first of the many tears with which I have paid unaffected tribute to my beloved uncle's memory.

The next spring no more pale grass and strange weeds came up in the shunned house's terraced garden, and shortly afterward Carrington Harris rented the place. It is still spectral, but its strangeness fascinates me, and I shall find mixed with my relief a queer regret when it is torn down to make way for a tawdry shop or vulgar apartment building. The barren old trees in the yard have begun to bear small, sweet apples, and last year the birds nested in their gnarled boughs.



Ghost Stories of an Antiquary

James, Montague Rhodes

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About James:

Montague Rhodes James, OM, MA, (August 1, 1862 – June 12, 1936), who used the publication name M. R. James, was a noted British mediaeval scholar and provost of King's College, Cambridge (1905–1918) and of Eton College (1918–1936). He is best remembered for his ghost stories which are widely regarded as among the finest in English literature. One of James' most important achievements was to redefine the ghost story for the new century by dispensing with many of the formal gothic trappings of his predecessors, and replacing them with more realistic contemporary settings.

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These stories are dedicated to all those who at various times have listened to them.

PREFACE

If anyone is curious about my local settings, let it be recorded that St Bertrand de Comminges and Viborg are real places: that in ’Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You’ I had Felixstowe in mind. As for the fragments of ostensible erudition which are scattered about my pages, hardly anything in them is not pure invention; there never was, naturally, any such book as that which I quote in ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’. ’Canon Alberic’s Scrap-book’ was written in 1894 and printed soon after in the *National Review*, ‘Lost Hearts’ appeared in the *Pall Mall Magazine*; of the next five stories, most of which were read to friends at Christmas-time at King’s College, Cambridge, I only recollect that I wrote ‘Number 13’ in 1899, while ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’ was composed in the summer of 1904.

M. R. JAMES

CANON ALBERIC'S SCRAP-BOOK

St Bertrand de Comminges is a decayed town on the spurs of the Pyrénées, not very far from Toulouse, and still nearer to Bagnères-de-Luchon. It was the site of a bishopric until the Revolution, and has a cathedral which is visited by a certain number of tourists. In the spring of 1883 an Englishman arrived at this old-world place— I can hardly dignify it with the name of city, for there are not a thousand inhabitants. He was a Cambridge man, who had come specially from Toulouse to see St Bertrand's Church, and had left two friends, who were less keen archaeologists than himself, in their hotel at Toulouse, under promise to join him on the following morning. Half an hour at the church would satisfy *them*, and all three could then pursue their journey in the direction of Auch. But our Englishman had come early on the day in question, and proposed to himself to fill a note-book and to use several dozens of plates in the process of describing and photographing every corner of the wonderful church that dominates the little hill of Comminges. In order to carry out this design satisfactorily, it was necessary to monopolize the verger of the church for the day. The verger or sacristan (I prefer the latter appellation, inaccurate as it may be) was accordingly sent for by the somewhat brusque lady who keeps the inn of the Chapeau Rouge; and when he came, the Englishman found him an unexpectedly interesting object of study. It was not in the personal appearance of the little, dry, wizened old man that the interest lay, for he was precisely like dozens of other church-guardians in France, but in a curious furtive or rather hunted and oppressed air which he had. He was perpetually half glancing behind him; the muscles of his back and shoulders seemed to be hunched in a continual nervous contraction, as if he were expecting every moment to find himself in the clutch of an enemy. The Englishman hardly knew whether to put him down as a man haunted by a fixed delusion, or as one oppressed by a guilty conscience, or as an unbearably henpecked husband. The probabilities, when reckoned up, certainly pointed to the last idea; but, still, the impression conveyed was that of a more formidable persecutor even than a termagant wife.

However, the Englishman (let us call him Dennistoun) was soon too deep in his note-book and too busy with his camera to give more than an occasional glance to the sacristan. Whenever he did look at him, he found him at no great distance, either huddling himself back against the wall or crouching in one of the gorgeous stalls. Dennistoun became rather fidgety after a time. Mingled suspicions that he was keeping the old man from his *déjeuner*, that he was regarded as likely to make away with St Bertrand's ivory crozier, or with the dusty stuffed crocodile that hangs over the font, began to torment him.

'Won't you go home?' he said at last; 'I'm quite well able to finish my notes alone; you can lock me in if you like. I shall want at least two hours more here, and it must be cold for you, isn't it?'

'Good heavens!' said the little man, whom the suggestion seemed to throw into a state of unaccountable terror, 'such a thing cannot be thought of for a moment. Leave monsieur alone in the church? No, no; two hours, three hours, all will be the same to me. I have breakfasted, I am not at all cold, with many thanks to monsieur.'

'Very well, my little man,' quoth Dennistoun to himself: 'you have been warned, and you must take the consequences.'

Before the expiration of the two hours, the stalls, the enormous dilapidated organ, the choir-screen of Bishop John de Mauléon, the remnants of glass and tapestry, and the objects in the treasure-chamber had been well and truly examined; the sacristan still keeping at Dennistoun's heels, and every now and then whipping round as if he had been stung, when one or other of the strange noises that trouble a large empty building fell on his ear. Curious noises they were, sometimes.

'Once,' Dennistoun said to me, 'I could have sworn I heard a thin metallic voice laughing high up in the tower. I darted an inquiring glance at my sacristan. He was white to the lips. "It is he— that is— it is no one; the door is locked," was all he said, and we looked at each other for a full minute.'

Another little incident puzzled Dennistoun a good deal. He was examining a large dark picture that hangs behind the altar, one of a series illustrating the miracles of St Bertrand. The composition of the picture is well-nigh indecipherable, but there is a Latin legend below, which runs thus:

Qualiter S. Bertrandus liberavit hominem quem diabolus diu volebat strangulare. (How St Bertrand delivered a man whom the Devil long sought to strangle.)

Dennistoun was turning to the sacristan with a smile and a jocular remark of some sort on his lips, but he was confounded to see the old man on his knees, gazing at the picture with the eye of a suppliant in agony, his hands tightly clasped, and a rain of tears on his cheeks. Dennistoun naturally pretended to have noticed nothing, but the question would not go away from him,'Why should a daub of this kind affect anyone so strongly?' He seemed to himself to be getting some sort of clue to the reason of the strange look that had been puzzling him all the day: the man must be a monomaniac; but what was his monomania?

It was nearly five o'clock; the short day was drawing in, and the church began to fill with shadows, while the curious noises— the muffled footfalls and distant talking voices that had been perceptible all day— seemed, no doubt because of the fading light and the consequently quickened sense of hearing, to become more frequent and insistent.

The sacristan began for the first time to show signs of hurry and impatience. He heaved a sigh of relief when camera and note-book were finally packed up and stowed away, and hurriedly beckoned Dennistoun to the western door of the church, under the tower. It was time to ring the Angelus. A few pulls at the reluctant rope, and the great bell Bertrande, high in the tower, began to speak, and swung her voice up among the pines and down to the valleys, loud with mountain-streams, calling the dwellers on those lonely hills to remember and repeat the salutation of the angel to her whom he called Blessed among women. With that a profound quiet seemed to fall for the first time that day upon the little town, and Dennistoun and the sacristan went out of the church.

On the doorstep they fell into conversation.

'Monsieur seemed to interest himself in the old choir-books in the sacristy.'

'Undoubtedly. I was going to ask you if there were a library in the town.'

’No, monsieur; perhaps there used to be one belonging to the Chapter, but it is now such a small place— ’ Here came a strange pause of irresolution, as it seemed; then, with a sort of plunge, he went on: ’But if monsieur is *amateur des vieux livres*, I have at home something that might interest him. It is not a hundred yards.’

At once all Dennistoun’s cherished dreams of finding priceless manuscripts in untrodden corners of France flashed up, to die down again the next moment. It was probably a stupid missal of Plantin’s printing, about 1580. Where was the likelihood that a place so near Toulouse would not have been ransacked long ago by collectors? However, it would be foolish not to go; he would reproach himself for ever after if he refused. So they set off. On the way the curious irresolution and sudden determination of the sacristan recurred to Dennistoun, and he wondered in a shamefaced way whether he was being decoyed into some purlieu to be made away with as a supposed rich Englishman. He contrived, therefore, to begin talking with his guide, and to drag in, in a rather clumsy fashion, the fact that he expected two friends to join him early the next morning. To his surprise, the announcement seemed to relieve the sacristan at once of some of the anxiety that oppressed him.

‘That is well,’ he said quite brightly— ’that is very well. Monsieur will travel in company with his friends: they will be always near him. It is a good thing to travel thus in company— sometimes.’

The last word appeared to be added as an afterthought and to bring with it a relapse into gloom for the poor little man.

They were soon at the house, which was one rather larger than its neighbours, stone-built, with a shield carved over the door, the shield of Alberic de Mauléon, a collateral descendant, Dennistoun tells me, of Bishop John de Mauléon. This Alberic was a Canon of Comminges from 1680 to 1701. The upper windows of the mansion were boarded up, and the whole place bore, as does the rest of Comminges, the aspect of decaying age.

Arrived on his doorstep, the sacristan paused a moment.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘perhaps, after all, monsieur has not the time?’

’Not at all— lots of time— nothing to do till tomorrow. Let us see what it is you have got.’

The door was opened at this point, and a face looked out, a face far younger than the sacristan’s, but bearing something of the same distressing look: only here it seemed to be the mark, not so much of fear for personal safety as of acute anxiety on behalf of another. Plainly the owner of the face was the sacristan’s daughter; and, but for the expression I have described, she was a handsome girl enough. She brightened up considerably on seeing her father accompanied by an able-bodied stranger. A few remarks passed between father and daughter of which Dennistoun only caught these words, said by the sacristan: ’He was laughing in the church,’ words which were answered only by a look of terror from the girl.

But in another minute they were in the sitting-room of the house, a small, high chamber with a stone floor, full of moving shadows cast by a wood-fire that flickered on a great hearth. Something of the character of an oratory was imparted to it by a tall crucifix, which reached almost to the ceiling on one side; the figure was painted of the natural colours, the cross was black. Under this stood a chest of some age and solidity, and when a lamp had been brought, and chairs set, the sacristan went to this chest, and produced therefrom, with growing excitement and nervousness, as Dennistoun thought, a large book, wrapped in a white cloth, on which cloth a cross was rudely embroidered in red thread. Even before the wrapping had been removed, Dennistoun began to be interested by the size and shape of the volume. ‘Too large for a missal,’ he thought, ’and not the shape of an antiphoner; perhaps it may be something good, after all.’ The next moment the book was open, and Dennistoun felt that he had at last lit upon something better than good. Before him lay a large folio, bound, perhaps, late in the seventeenth century, with the arms of Canon Alberic de Mauléon stamped in gold on the sides. There may have been a hundred and fifty leaves of paper in the book, and on almost every one of them was fastened a leaf from an illuminated manuscript. Such a collection Dennistoun had hardly dreamed of in his wildest moments. Here were ten leaves from a copy of Genesis, illustrated with pictures, which could not be later than A.D. 700. Further on was a complete

set of pictures from a Psalter, of English execution, of the very finest kind that the thirteenth century could produce; and, perhaps best of all, there were twenty leaves of uncial writing in Latin, which, as a few words seen here and there told him at once, must belong to some very early unknown patristic treatise. Could it possibly be a fragment of the copy of Papias 'On the Words of Our Lord', which was known to have existed as late as the twelfth century at Nîmes?[1] In any case, his mind was made up; that book must return to Cambridge with him, even if he had to draw the whole of his balance from the bank and stay at St. Bertrand till the money came. He glanced up at the sacristan to see if his face yielded any hint that the book was for sale. The sacristan was pale, and his lips were working.

'If monsieur will turn on to the end,' he said.

So monsieur turned on, meeting new treasures at every rise of a leaf; and at the end of the book he came upon two sheets of paper, of much more recent date than anything he had seen yet, which puzzled him considerably. They must be contemporary, he decided, with the unprincipled Canon Alberic, who had doubtless plundered the Chapter library of St Bertrand to form this priceless scrap-book. On the first of the paper sheets was a plan, carefully drawn and instantly recognizable by a person who knew the ground, of the south aisle and cloisters of St Bertrand's. There were curious signs looking like planetary symbols, and a few Hebrew words in the corners; and in the northwest angle of the cloister was a cross drawn in gold paint. Below the plan were some lines of writing in Latin, which ran thus:

> *Responsa 12(mi) Dec. 1694. Interrogatum est: Inveniamne? Responsum est: Invenies. Fiamne dives? Fies. Vivamne invidendus? Vives. Moriarne in lecto meo? Ita.* (Answers of the 12th of December, 1694. It was asked: Shall I find it? Answer: Thou shalt. Shall I become rich? Thou wilt. Shall I live an object of envy? Thou wilt. Shall I die in my bed? Thou wilt.)

1.We now know that these leaves did contain a considerable fragment of that work, if not of that actual copy of it.

’A good specimen of the treasure-hunter’s record— quite reminds one of Mr Minor-Canon Quatremain in *Old St Paul’s*,’ was Dennistoun’s comment, and he turned the leaf.

What he then saw impressed him, as he has often told me, more than he could have conceived any drawing or picture capable of impressing him. And, though the drawing he saw is no longer in existence, there is a photograph of it (which I possess) which fully bears out that statement. The picture in question was a sepia drawing at the end of the seventeenth century, representing, one would say at first sight, a Biblical scene; for the architecture (the picture represented an interior) and the figures had that semi-classical flavour about them which the artists of two hundred years ago thought appropriate to illustrations of the Bible. On the right was a king on his throne, the throne elevated on twelve steps, a canopy overhead, soldiers on either side— evidently King Solomon. He was bending forward with outstretched sceptre, in attitude of command; his face expressed horror and disgust, yet there was in it also the mark of imperious command and confident power. The left half of the picture was the strangest, however. The interest plainly centred there.

On the pavement before the throne were grouped four soldiers, surrounding a crouching figure which must be described in a moment. A fifth soldier lay dead on the pavement, his neck distorted, and his eye-balls starting from his head. The four surrounding guards were looking at the King. In their faces, the sentiment of horror was intensified; they seemed, in fact, only restrained from flight by their implicit trust in their master. All this terror was plainly excited by the being that crouched in their midst.

I entirely despair of conveying by any words the impression which this figure makes upon anyone who looks at it. I recollect once showing the photograph of the drawing to a lecturer on morphology— a person of, I was going to say, abnormally sane and unimaginative habits of mind. He absolutely refused to be alone for the rest of that evening, and he told me afterwards that for many nights he had not dared to put out his light before going to sleep. However, the main traits of the figure I can at least indicate.

At first you saw only a mass of coarse, matted black hair; presently it was seen that this covered a body of fearful thinness, almost a skeleton, but with the muscles standing out like wires. The hands were of a dusky pallor, covered, like the body, with long, coarse hairs, and hideously taloned. The eyes, touched in with a burning yellow, had intensely black pupils, and were fixed upon the throned King with a look of beast-like hate. Imagine one of the awful bird-catching spiders of South America translated into human form, and endowed with intelligence just less than human, and you will have some faint conception of the terror inspired by the appalling effigy. One remark is universally made by those to whom I have shown the picture: ‘It was drawn from the life.’

As soon as the first shock of his irresistible fright had subsided, Dennistoun stole a look at his hosts. The sacristan’s hands were pressed upon his eyes; his daughter, looking up at the cross on the wall, was telling her beads feverishly.

At last the question was asked: ‘Is this book for sale?’

There was the same hesitation, the same plunge of determination that he had noticed before, and then came the welcome answer: ’If monsieur pleases.’

‘How much do you ask for it?’

‘I will take two hundred and fifty francs.’

This was confounding. Even a collector’s conscience is sometimes stirred, and Dennistoun’s conscience was tenderer than a collector’s.

‘My good man!’ he said again and again, ’your book is worth far more than two hundred and fifty francs. I assure you— far more.’

But the answer did not vary: ’I will take two hundred and fifty francs— not more.’

There was really no possibility of refusing such a chance. The money was paid, the receipt signed, a glass of wine drunk over the transaction, and then the sacristan seemed to become a new man. He stood upright, he ceased to throw those suspicious glances behind him, he actually laughed or tried to laugh. Dennistoun rose to go.

‘I shall have the honour of accompanying monsieur to his hotel?’ said the sacristan.

’Oh, no, thanks! it isn’t a hundred yards. I know the way perfectly, and there is a moon.’

The offer was pressed three or four times and refused as often.

’Then, monsieur will summon me if— if he finds occasion; he will keep the middle of the road, the sides are so rough.’

‘Certainly, certainly,’ said Dennistoun, who was impatient to examine his prize by himself; and he stepped out into the passage with his book under his arm.

Here he was met by the daughter; she, it appeared, was anxious to do a little business on her own account; perhaps, like Gehazi, to ’take somewhat’ from the foreigner whom her father had spared.

’A silver crucifix and chain for the neck; monsieur would perhaps be good enough to accept it?’

Well, really, Dennistoun hadn’t much use for these things. What did mademoiselle want for it?

‘Nothing— nothing in the world. Monsieur is more than welcome to it.’

The tone in which this and much more was said was unmistakably genuine, so that Dennistoun was reduced to profuse thanks, and submitted to have the chain put round his neck. It really seemed as if he had rendered the father and daughter some service which they hardly knew how to repay. As he set off with his book they stood at the door looking after him, and they were still looking when he waved them a last good night from the steps of the Chapeau Rouge.

Dinner was over, and Dennistoun was in his bedroom, shut up alone with his acquisition. The landlady had manifested a particular interest in him since he had told her that he had paid a visit to the sacristan and bought an old book from him. He thought, too, that he had heard a hurried dialogue between her and the said sacristan in the passage outside the *salle à manger*; some words to the effect that ’Pierre and Bertrand would be sleeping in the house’ had closed the conversation.

All this time a growing feeling of discomfort had been creeping over him— nervous reaction, perhaps, after the delight of his discovery. Whatever it was, it resulted in a conviction that there was someone behind him, and that he was far more comfortable with his back to the wall. All this, of course, weighed

light in the balance as against the obvious value of the collection he had acquired. And now, as I said, he was alone in his bedroom, taking stock of Canon Alberic's treasures, in which every moment revealed something more charming.

'Bless Canon Alberic!' said Dennistoun, who had an inveterate habit of talking to himself. 'I wonder where he is now? Dear me! I wish that landlady would learn to laugh in a more cheering manner; it makes one feel as if there was someone dead in the house. Half a pipe more, did you say? I think perhaps you are right. I wonder what that crucifix is that the young woman insisted on giving me? Last century, I suppose. Yes, probably. It is rather a nuisance of a thing to have round one's neck— just too heavy. Most likely her father has been wearing it for years. I think I might give it a clean up before I put it away.'

He had taken the crucifix off, and laid it on the table, when his attention was caught by an object lying on the red cloth just by his left elbow. Two or three ideas of what it might be flitted through his brain with their own incalculable quickness.

A penwiper? No, no such thing in the house. A rat? No, too black. A large spider? I trust to goodness not— no. Good God! a hand like the hand in that picture!

In another infinitesimal flash he had taken it in. Pale, dusky skin, covering nothing but bones and tendons of appalling strength; coarse black hairs, longer than ever grew on a human hand; nails rising from the ends of the fingers and curving sharply down and forward, grey, horny, and wrinkled.

He flew out of his chair with deadly, inconceivable terror clutching at his heart. The shape, whose left hand rested on the table, was rising to a standing posture behind his seat, its right hand crooked above his scalp. There was black and tattered drapery about it; the coarse hair covered it as in the drawing. The lower jaw was thin— what can I call it?— shallow, like a beast's; teeth showed behind the black lips; there was no nose; the eyes, of a fiery yellow, against which the pupils showed black and intense, and the exulting hate and thirst to destroy life which shone there, were the most horrifying features in the whole vision. There was intelligence of a kind in them— intelligence beyond that of a beast, below that of a man.

The feelings which this horror stirred in Dennistoun were the intensest physical fear and the most profound mental loathing. What did he do? What could he do? He has never been quite certain what words he said, but he knows that he spoke, that he grasped blindly at the silver crucifix, that he was conscious of a movement towards him on the part of the demon, and that he screamed with the voice of an animal in hideous pain.

Pierre and Bertrand, the two sturdy little serving-men, who rushed in, saw nothing, but felt themselves thrust aside by something that passed out between them, and found Dennistoun in a swoon. They sat up with him that night, and his two friends were at St Bertrand by nine o'clock next morning. He himself, though still shaken and nervous, was almost himself by that time, and his story found credence with them, though not until they had seen the drawing and talked with the sacristan.

Almost at dawn the little man had come to the inn on some pretence, and had listened with the deepest interest to the story retailed by the landlady. He showed no surprise.

'It is he— it is he! I have seen him myself,' was his only comment; and to all questionings but one reply was vouchsafed: 'Deux fois je l'ai vu: mille fois je l'ai senti.' He would tell them nothing of the provenance of the book, nor any details of his experiences. 'I shall soon sleep, and my rest will be sweet. Why should you trouble me?' he said.[2]

We shall never know what he or Canon Alberic de Mauléon suffered. At the back of that fateful drawing were some lines of writing which may be supposed to throw light on the situation:

> *Contradictio Salomonis cum demonio nocturno. Albericus de Mauléone delineavit. V. Deus in adiutorium. Ps. Qui habitat. Sancte Bertrande, demoniorum effugator, intercede pro me miserrimo. Primum uidi nocte 12(mi) Dec. 1694: uidebo mox ultimum. Peccaui et passus sum, plura adhuc passurus. Dec. 29, 1701.*[3]

I have never quite understood what was Dennistoun's view of the events I have narrated. He quoted to me once a text from

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2.He died that summer; his daughter married, and settled at St Papoul. She never understood the circumstances of her father's 'obsession'.

Ecclesiasticus: ’Some spirits there be that are created for vengeance, and in their fury lay on sore strokes.’ On another occasion he said: ’Isaiah was a very sensible man; doesn’t he say something about night monsters living in the ruins of Babylon? These things are rather beyond us at present.’

Another confidence of his impressed me rather, and I sympathized with it. We had been, last year, to Comminges, to see Canon Alberic’s tomb. It is a great marble erection with an effigy of the Canon in a large wig and soutane, and an elaborate eulogy of his learning below. I saw Dennistoun talking for some time with the Vicar of St Bertrand’s, and as we drove away he said to me: ’I hope it isn’t wrong: you know I am a Presbyterian— but I— I believe there will be “saying of Mass and singing of dirges” for Alberic de Mauléon’s rest.’ Then he added, with a touch of the Northern British in his tone, ‘I had no notion they came so dear.’

* * * * *

The book is in the Wentworth Collection at Cambridge. The drawing was photographed and then burnt by Dennistoun on the day when he left Comminges on the occasion of his first visit.

3.i.e., The Dispute of Solomon with a demon of the night. Drawn by Alberic de Mauléon. Versicle. O Lord, make haste to help me. Psalm. Whoso dwelleth xci. Saint Bertrand, who puttest devils to flight, pray for me most unhappy. I saw it first on the night of Dec. 12, 1694: soon I shall see it for the last time. I have sinned and suffered, and have more to suffer yet. Dec. 29, 1701. The ‘Gallia Christiana’ gives the date of the Canon’s death as December 31, 1701, ‘in bed, of a sudden seizure’. Details of this kind are not common in the great work of the Sammarthani.

LOST HEARTS

It was, as far as I can ascertain, in September of the year 1811 that a post-chaise drew up before the door of Aswarby Hall, in the heart of Lincolnshire. The little boy who was the only passenger in the chaise, and who jumped out as soon as it had stopped, looked about him with the keenest curiosity during the short interval that elapsed between the ringing of the bell and the opening of the hall door. He saw a tall, square, red-brick house, built in the reign of Anne; a stone-pillared porch had been added in the purer classical style of 1790; the windows of the house were many, tall and narrow, with small panes and thick white woodwork. A pediment, pierced with a round window, crowned the front. There were wings to right and left, connected by curious glazed galleries, supported by colonnades, with the central block. These wings plainly contained the stables and offices of the house. Each was surmounted by an ornamental cupola with a gilded vane.

An evening light shone on the building, making the window-panes glow like so many fires. Away from the Hall in front stretched a flat park studded with oaks and fringed with firs, which stood out against the sky. The clock in the church-tower, buried in trees on the edge of the park, only its golden weather-cock catching the light, was striking six, and the sound came gently beating down the wind. It was altogether a pleasant impression, though tinged with the sort of melancholy appropriate to an evening in early autumn, that was conveyed to the mind of the boy who was standing in the porch waiting for the door to open to him.

The post-chaise had brought him from Warwickshire, where, some six months before, he had been left an orphan. Now, owing to the generous offer of his elderly cousin, Mr Abney, he had come to live at Aswarby. The offer was unexpected, because all who knew anything of Mr Abney looked upon him as a somewhat austere recluse, into whose steady-going household the advent of a small boy would import a new and, it seemed, incongruous element. The truth is that very little was known of Mr Abney’s pursuits or temper. The Professor of Greek at Cambridge had been heard to say that no one knew more of the religious beliefs of the later pagans than did the owner of

Aswarby. Certainly his library contained all the then available books bearing on the Mysteries, the Orphic poems, the worship of Mithras, and the Neo-Platonists. In the marble-paved hall stood a fine group of Mithras slaying a bull, which had been imported from the Levant at great expense by the owner. He had contributed a description of it to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and he had written a remarkable series of articles in the *Critical Museum* on the superstitions of the Romans of the Lower Empire. He was looked upon, in fine, as a man wrapped up in his books, and it was a matter of great surprise among his neighbours that he should ever have heard of his orphan cousin, Stephen Elliott, much more that he should have volunteered to make him an inmate of Aswarby Hall.

Whatever may have been expected by his neighbours, it is certain that Mr Abney— the tall, the thin, the austere— seemed inclined to give his young cousin a kindly reception. The moment the front-door was opened he darted out of his study, rubbing his hands with delight.

'How are you, my boy?— how are you? How old are you?' said he— 'that is, you are not too much tired, I hope, by your journey to eat your supper?'

'No, thank you, sir,' said Master Elliott; 'I am pretty well.'

'That's a good lad,' said Mr Abney. 'And how old are you, my boy?'

It seemed a little odd that he should have asked the question twice in the first two minutes of their acquaintance.

'I'm twelve years old next birthday, sir,' said Stephen.

'And when is your birthday, my dear boy? Eleventh of September, eh? That's well— that's very well. Nearly a year hence, isn't it? I like— ha, ha!— I like to get these things down in my book. Sure it's twelve? Certain?'

'Yes, quite sure, sir.'

'Well, well! Take him to Mrs Bunch's room, Parkes, and let him have his tea— supper— whatever it is.'

'Yes, sir,' answered the staid Mr Parkes; and conducted Stephen to the lower regions.

Mrs Bunch was the most comfortable and human person whom Stephen had as yet met at Aswarby. She made him completely at home; they were great friends in a quarter of an hour: and great friends they remained. Mrs Bunch had been

born in the neighbourhood some fifty-five years before the date of Stephen's arrival, and her residence at the Hall was of twenty years' standing. Consequently, if anyone knew the ins and outs of the house and the district, Mrs Bunch knew them; and she was by no means disinclined to communicate her information.

Certainly there were plenty of things about the Hall and the Hall gardens which Stephen, who was of an adventurous and inquiring turn, was anxious to have explained to him. 'Who built the temple at the end of the laurel walk? Who was the old man whose picture hung on the staircase, sitting at a table, with a skull under his hand?' These and many similar points were cleared up by the resources of Mrs Bunch's powerful intellect. There were others, however, of which the explanations furnished were less satisfactory.

One November evening Stephen was sitting by the fire in the housekeeper's room reflecting on his surroundings.

'Is Mr Abney a good man, and will he go to heaven?' he suddenly asked, with the peculiar confidence which children possess in the ability of their elders to settle these questions, the decision of which is believed to be reserved for other tribunals.

'Good?— bless the child!' said Mrs Bunch. 'Master's as kind a soul as ever I see! Didn't I never tell you of the little boy as he took in out of the street, as you may say, this seven years back? and the little girl, two years after I first come here?'

'No. Do tell me all about them, Mrs Bunch— now, this minute!'

'Well,' said Mrs Bunch, 'the little girl I don't seem to recollect so much about. I know master brought her back with him from his walk one day, and give orders to Mrs Ellis, as was housekeeper then, as she should be took every care with. And the pore child hadn't no one belonging to her— she telled me so her own self— and here she lived with us a matter of three weeks it might be; and then, whether she were somethink of a gipsy in her blood or what not, but one morning she out of her bed afore any of us had opened a eye, and neither track nor yet trace of her have I set eyes on since. Master was wonderful put about, and had all the ponds dragged; but it's my belief she was had away by them gipsies, for there was singing round the house for as much as an hour the night she went, and Parkes,

he declare as he heard them a-calling in the woods all that afternoon. Dear, dear! a hodd child she was, so silent in her ways and all, but I was wonderful taken up with her, so domesticated she was— surprising.'

'And what about the little boy?' said Stephen.

'Ah, that pore boy!' sighed Mrs Bunch. 'He were a foreigner— Jevanny he called hisself— and he come a-tweaking his 'urdy-gurdy round and about the drive one winter day, and master 'ad him in that minute, and ast all about where he came from, and how old he was, and how he made his way, and where was his relatives, and all as kind as heart could wish. But it went the same way with him. They're a hunruly lot, them foreign nations, I do suppose, and he was off one fine morning just the same as the girl. Why he went and what he done was our question for as much as a year after; for he never took his 'urdy-gurdy, and there it lays on the shelf.'

The remainder of the evening was spent by Stephen in miscellaneous cross-examination of Mrs Bunch and in efforts to extract a tune from the hurdy-gurdy.

That night he had a curious dream. At the end of the passage at the top of the house, in which his bedroom was situated, there was an old disused bathroom. It was kept locked, but the upper half of the door was glazed, and, since the muslin curtains which used to hang there had long been gone, you could look in and see the lead-lined bath affixed to the wall on the right hand, with its head towards the window.

On the night of which I am speaking, Stephen Elliott found himself, as he thought, looking through the glazed door. The moon was shining through the window, and he was gazing at a figure which lay in the bath.

His description of what he saw reminds me of what I once beheld myself in the famous vaults of St Michan's Church in Dublin, which possesses the horrid property of preserving corpses from decay for centuries. A figure inexpressibly thin and pathetic, of a dusty leaden colour, enveloped in a shroud-like garment, the thin lips crooked into a faint and dreadful smile, the hands pressed tightly over the region of the heart.

As he looked upon it, a distant, almost inaudible moan seemed to issue from its lips, and the arms began to stir. The terror of the sight forced Stephen backwards and he awoke to

the fact that he was indeed standing on the cold boarded floor of the passage in the full light of the moon. With a courage which I do not think can be common among boys of his age, he went to the door of the bathroom to ascertain if the figure of his dreams were really there. It was not, and he went back to bed.

Mrs Bunch was much impressed next morning by his story, and went so far as to replace the muslin curtain over the glazed door of the bathroom. Mr Abney, moreover, to whom he confided his experiences at breakfast, was greatly interested and made notes of the matter in what he called ’his book’.

The spring equinox was approaching, as Mr Abney frequently reminded his cousin, adding that this had been always considered by the ancients to be a critical time for the young: that Stephen would do well to take care of himself, and to shut his bedroom window at night; and that Censorinus had some valuable remarks on the subject. Two incidents that occurred about this time made an impression upon Stephen’s mind.

The first was after an unusually uneasy and oppressed night that he had passed— though he could not recall any particular dream that he had had.

The following evening Mrs Bunch was occupying herself in mending his nightgown.

‘Gracious me, Master Stephen!’ she broke forth rather irritably, ’how do you manage to tear your nightdress all to flinders this way? Look here, sir, what trouble you do give to poor servants that have to darn and mend after you!’

There was indeed a most destructive and apparently wanton series of slits or scorings in the garment, which would undoubtedly require a skilful needle to make good. They were confined to the left side of the chest— long, parallel slits about six inches in length, some of them not quite piercing the texture of the linen. Stephen could only express his entire ignorance of their origin: he was sure they were not there the night before.

‘But,’ he said, ’Mrs Bunch, they are just the same as the scratches on the outside of my bedroom door: and I’m sure I never had anything to do with making *them*.’

Mrs Bunch gazed at him open-mouthed, then snatched up a candle, departed hastily from the room, and was heard making her way upstairs. In a few minutes she came down.

'Well,' she said, 'Master Stephen, it's a funny thing to me how them marks and scratches can 'a' come there— too high up for any cat or dog to 'ave made 'em, much less a rat: for all the world like a Chinaman's finger-nails, as my uncle in the tea-trade used to tell us of when we was girls together. I wouldn't say nothing to master, not if I was you, Master Stephen, my dear; and just turn the key of the door when you go to your bed.'

'I always do, Mrs Bunch, as soon as I've said my prayers.'

'Ah, that's a good child: always say your prayers, and then no one can't hurt you.'

Herewith Mrs Bunch addressed herself to mending the injured nightgown, with intervals of meditation, until bed-time. This was on a Friday night in March, 1812.

On the following evening the usual duet of Stephen and Mrs Bunch was augmented by the sudden arrival of Mr Parkes, the butler, who as a rule kept himself rather*to* himself in his own pantry. He did not see that Stephen was there: he was, moreover, flustered and less slow of speech than was his wont.

'Master may get up his own wine, if he likes, of an evening,' was his first remark. 'Either I do it in the daytime or not at all, Mrs Bunch. I don't know what it may be: very like it's the rats, or the wind got into the cellars; but I'm not so young as I was, and I can't go through with it as I have done.'

'Well, Mr Parkes, you know it is a surprising place for the rats, is the Hall.'

'I'm not denying that, Mrs Bunch; and, to be sure, many a time I've heard the tale from the men in the shipyards about the rat that could speak. I never laid no confidence in that before; but tonight, if I'd demeaned myself to lay my ear to the door of the further bin, I could pretty much have heard what they was saying.'

'Oh, there, Mr Parkes, I've no patience with your fancies! Rats talking in the wine-cellar indeed!'

'Well, Mrs Bunch, I've no wish to argue with you: all I say is, if you choose to go to the far bin, and lay your ear to the door, you may prove my words this minute.'

’What nonsense you do talk, Mr Parkes— not fit for children to listen to! Why, you’ll be frightening Master Stephen there out of his wits.’

‘What! Master Stephen?’ said Parkes, awaking to the consciousness of the boy’s presence. ’Master Stephen knows well enough when I’m a-playing a joke with you, Mrs Bunch.’

In fact, Master Stephen knew much too well to suppose that Mr Parkes had in the first instance intended a joke. He was interested, not altogether pleasantly, in the situation; but all his questions were unsuccessful in inducing the butler to give any more detailed account of his experiences in the wine-cellar.

* * * * *

We have now arrived at March 24, 1812. It was a day of curious experiences for Stephen: a windy, noisy day, which filled the house and the gardens with a restless impression. As Stephen stood by the fence of the grounds, and looked out into the park, he felt as if an endless procession of unseen people were sweeping past him on the wind, borne on resistlessly and aimlessly, vainly striving to stop themselves, to catch at something that might arrest their flight and bring them once again into contact with the living world of which they had formed a part. After luncheon that day Mr Abney said:

’Stephen, my boy, do you think you could manage to come to me tonight as late as eleven o’clock in my study? I shall be busy until that time, and I wish to show you something connected with your future life which it is most important that you should know. You are not to mention this matter to Mrs Bunch nor to anyone else in the house; and you had better go to your room at the usual time.’

Here was a new excitement added to life: Stephen eagerly grasped at the opportunity of sitting up till eleven o’clock. He looked in at the library door on his way upstairs that evening, and saw a brazier, which he had often noticed in the corner of the room, moved out before the fire; an old silver-gilt cup stood on the table, filled with red wine, and some written sheets of paper lay near it. Mr Abney was sprinkling some incense on the brazier from a round silver box as Stephen passed, but did not seem to notice his step.

The wind had fallen, and there was a still night and a full moon. At about ten o’clock Stephen was standing at the open

window of his bedroom, looking out over the country. Still as the night was, the mysterious population of the distant moon-lit woods was not yet lulled to rest. From time to time strange cries as of lost and despairing wanderers sounded from across the mere. They might be the notes of owls or water-birds, yet they did not quite resemble either sound. Were not they coming nearer? Now they sounded from the nearer side of the water, and in a few moments they seemed to be floating about among the shrubberies. Then they ceased; but just as Stephen was thinking of shutting the window and resuming his reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, he caught sight of two figures standing on the gravelled terrace that ran along the garden side of the Hall— the figures of a boy and girl, as it seemed; they stood side by side, looking up at the windows. Something in the form of the girl recalled irresistibly his dream of the figure in the bath. The boy inspired him with more acute fear.

Whilst the girl stood still, half smiling, with her hands clasped over her heart, the boy, a thin shape, with black hair and ragged clothing, raised his arms in the air with an appearance of menace and of unappeasable hunger and longing. The moon shone upon his almost transparent hands, and Stephen saw that the nails were fearfully long and that the light shone through them. As he stood with his arms thus raised, he disclosed a terrifying spectacle. On the left side of his chest there opened a black and gaping rent; and there fell upon Stephen's brain, rather than upon his ear, the impression of one of those hungry and desolate cries that he had heard resounding over the woods of Aswarby all that evening. In another moment this dreadful pair had moved swiftly and noiselessly over the dry gravel, and he saw them no more.

Inexpressibly frightened as he was, he determined to take his candle and go down to Mr Abney's study, for the hour appointed for their meeting was near at hand. The study or library opened out of the front-hall on one side, and Stephen, urged on by his terrors, did not take long in getting there. To effect an entrance was not so easy. It was not locked, he felt sure, for the key was on the outside of the door as usual. His repeated knocks produced no answer. Mr Abney was engaged: he was speaking. What! why did he try to cry out? and why was the cry choked in his throat? Had he, too, seen the mysterious

children? But now everything was quiet, and the door yielded to Stephen's terrified and frantic pushing.

* * * * *

On the table in Mr Abney's study certain papers were found which explained the situation to Stephen Elliott when he was of an age to understand them. The most important sentences were as follows:

'It was a belief very strongly and generally held by the ancients— of whose wisdom in these matters I have had such experience as induces me to place confidence in their assertions— that by enacting certain processes, which to us moderns have something of a barbaric complexion, a very remarkable enlightenment of the spiritual faculties in man may be attained: that, for example, by absorbing the personalities of a certain number of his fellow-creatures, an individual may gain a complete ascendancy over those orders of spiritual beings which control the elemental forces of our universe.

'It is recorded of Simon Magus that he was able to fly in the air, to become invisible, or to assume any form he pleased, by the agency of the soul of a boy whom, to use the libellous phrase employed by the author of the *Clementine Recognitions*, he had "murdered". I find it set down, moreover, with considerable detail in the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, that similar happy results may be produced by the absorption of the hearts of not less than three human beings below the age of twenty-one years. To the testing of the truth of this receipt I have devoted the greater part of the last twenty years, selecting as the *corpora vilia* of my experiment such persons as could conveniently be removed without occasioning a sensible gap in society. The first step I effected by the removal of one Phoebe Stanley, a girl of gipsy extraction, on March 24, 1792. The second, by the removal of a wandering Italian lad, named Giovanni Paoli, on the night of March 23, 1805. The final "victim"— to employ a word repugnant in the highest degree to my feelings— must be my cousin, Stephen Elliott. His day must be this March 24, 1812.

'The best means of effecting the required absorption is to remove the heart from the *living* subject, to reduce it to ashes, and to mingle them with about a pint of some red wine, preferably port. The remains of the first two subjects, at least, it will

be well to conceal: a disused bathroom or wine-cellar will be found convenient for such a purpose. Some annoyance may be experienced from the psychic portion of the subjects, which popular language dignifies with the name of ghosts. But the man of philosophic temperament— to whom alone the experiment is appropriate— will be little prone to attach importance to the feeble efforts of these beings to wreak their vengeance on him. I contemplate with the liveliest satisfaction the enlarged and emancipated existence which the experiment, if successful, will confer on me; not only placing me beyond the reach of human justice (so-called), but eliminating to a great extent the prospect of death itself.'

* * * * *

Mr Abney was found in his chair, his head thrown back, his face stamped with an expression of rage, fright, and mortal pain. In his left side was a terrible lacerated wound, exposing the heart. There was no blood on his hands, and a long knife that lay on the table was perfectly clean. A savage wild-cat might have inflicted the injuries. The window of the study was open, and it was the opinion of the coroner that Mr Abney had met his death by the agency of some wild creature. But Stephen Elliott's study of the papers I have quoted led him to a very different conclusion.

THE MEZZOTINT

Some time ago I believe I had the pleasure of telling you the story of an adventure which happened to a friend of mine by the name of Dennistoun, during his pursuit of objects of art for the museum at Cambridge.

He did not publish his experiences very widely upon his return to England; but they could not fail to become known to a good many of his friends, and among others to the gentleman who at that time presided over an art museum at another University. It was to be expected that the story should make a considerable impression on the mind of a man whose vocation lay in lines similar to Dennistoun's, and that he should be eager to catch at any explanation of the matter which tended to make it seem improbable that he should ever be called upon to deal with so agitating an emergency. It was, indeed, somewhat consoling to him to reflect that he was not expected to acquire ancient MSS. for his institution; that was the business of the Shelburnian Library. The authorities of that institution might, if they pleased, ransack obscure corners of the Continent for such matters. He was glad to be obliged at the moment to confine his attention to enlarging the already unsurpassed collection of English topographical drawings and engravings possessed by his museum. Yet, as it turned out, even a department so homely and familiar as this may have its dark corners, and to one of these Mr Williams was unexpectedly introduced.

Those who have taken even the most limited interest in the acquisition of topographical pictures are aware that there is one London dealer whose aid is indispensable to their researches. Mr J. W. Britnell publishes at short intervals very admirable catalogues of a large and constantly changing stock of engravings, plans, and old sketches of mansions, churches, and towns in England and Wales. These catalogues were, of course, the ABC of his subject to Mr Williams: but as his museum already contained an enormous accumulation of topographical pictures, he was a regular, rather than a copious, buyer; and he rather looked to Mr Britnell to fill up gaps in the rank and file of his collection than to supply him with rarities.

Now, in February of last year there appeared upon Mr Williams's desk at the museum a catalogue from Mr Britnell's

emporium, and accompanying it was a typewritten communication from the dealer himself. This latter ran as follows:

> Dear Sir,
> We beg to call your attention to No. 978 in our accompanying catalogue, which we shall be glad to send on approval.
> Yours faithfully,
> J. W. Britnell.

To turn to No. 978 in the accompanying catalogue was with Mr. Williams (as he observed to himself) the work of a moment, and in the place indicated he found the following entry:

> 978.— part of the century. 15 by 10 inches; black frame. £2 2s.

It was not specially exciting, and the price seemed high. However, as Mr Britnell, who knew his business and his customer, seemed to set store by it, Mr Williams wrote a postcard asking for the article to be sent on approval, along with some other engravings and sketches which appeared in the same catalogue. And so he passed without much excitement of anticipation to the ordinary labours of the day.

A parcel of any kind always arrives a day later than you expect it, and that of Mr Britnell proved, as I believe the right phrase goes, no exception to the rule. It was delivered at the museum by the afternoon post of Saturday, after Mr Williams had left his work, and it was accordingly brought round to his rooms in college by the attendant, in order that he might not have to wait over Sunday before looking through it and returning such of the contents as he did not propose to keep. And here he found it when he came in to tea, with a friend.

The only item with which I am concerned was the rather large, black-framed mezzotint of which I have already quoted the short description given in Mr Britnell’s catalogue. Some more details of it will have to be given, though I cannot hope to put before you the look of the picture as clearly as it is present to my own eye. Very nearly the exact duplicate of it may be seen in a good many old inn parlours, or in the passages of undisturbed country mansions at the present moment. It was a

rather indifferent mezzotint, and an indifferent mezzotint is, perhaps, the worst form of engraving known. It presented a full-face view of a not very large manor-house of the last century, with three rows of plain sashed windows with rusticated masonry about them, a parapet with balls or vases at the angles, and a small portico in the centre. On either side were trees, and in front a considerable expanse of lawn. The legend *A. W. F. sculpsit* was engraved on the narrow margin; and there was no further inscription. The whole thing gave the impression that it was the work of an amateur. What in the world Mr Britnell could mean by affixing the price of £2 2s. to such an object was more than Mr Williams could imagine. He turned it over with a good deal of contempt; upon the back was a paper label, the left-hand half of which had been torn off. All that remained were the ends of two lines of writing; the first had the letters—*ngley Hall*; the second,—*ssex*.

It would, perhaps, be just worth while to identify the place represented, which he could easily do with the help of a gazetteer, and then he would send it back to Mr Britnell, with some remarks reflecting upon the judgement of that gentleman.

He lighted the candles, for it was now dark, made the tea, and supplied the friend with whom he had been playing golf (for I believe the authorities of the University I write of indulge in that pursuit by way of relaxation); and tea was taken to the accompaniment of a discussion which golfing persons can imagine for themselves, but which the conscientious writer has no right to inflict upon any non-golfing persons.

The conclusion arrived at was that certain strokes might have been better, and that in certain emergencies neither player had experienced that amount of luck which a human being has a right to expect. It was now that the friend— let us call him Professor Binks— took up the framed engraving and said:

‘What’s this place, Williams?’

‘Just what I am going to try to find out,’ said Williams, going to the shelf for a gazetteer. ’Look at the back. Somethingley Hall, either in Sussex or Essex. Half the name’s gone, you see. You don’t happen to know it, I suppose?’

‘It’s from that man Britnell, I suppose, isn’t it?’ said Binks. ’Is it for the museum?’

‘Well, I think I should buy it if the price was five shillings,’ said Williams; ’but for some unearthly reason he wants two guineas for it. I can’t conceive why. It’s a wretched engraving, and there aren’t even any figures to give it life.’

‘It’s not worth two guineas, I should think,’ said Binks; ’but I don’t think it’s so badly done. The moonlight seems rather good to me; and I should have thought there *were* figures, or at least a figure, just on the edge in front.’

‘Let’s look,’ said Williams. ’Well, it’s true the light is rather cleverly given. Where’s your figure? Oh, yes! Just the head, in the very front of the picture.’

And indeed there was— hardly more than a black blot on the extreme edge of the engraving— the head of a man or woman, a good deal muffled up, the back turned to the spectator, and looking towards the house.

Williams had not noticed it before.

‘Still,’ he said, ’though it’s a cleverer thing than I thought, I can’t spend two guineas of museum money on a picture of a place I don’t know.’

Professor Binks had his work to do, and soon went; and very nearly up to Hall time Williams was engaged in a vain attempt to identify the subject of his picture. ’If the vowel before the *ng* had only been left, it would have been easy enough,’ he thought; ’but as it is, the name may be anything from Guestingley to Langley, and there are many more names ending like this than I thought; and this rotten book has no index of terminations.’

Hall in Mr Williams’s college was at seven. It need not be dwelt upon; the less so as he met there colleagues who had been playing golf during the afternoon, and words with which we have no concern were freely bandied across the table— merely golfing words, I would hasten to explain.

I suppose an hour or more to have been spent in what is called common-room after dinner. Later in the evening some few retired to Williams’s rooms, and I have little doubt that whist was played and tobacco smoked. During a lull in these operations Williams picked up the mezzotint from the table without looking at it, and handed it to a person mildly interested in art, telling him where it had come from, and the other particulars which we already know.

The gentleman took it carelessly, looked at it, then said, in a tone of some interest:

'It's really a very good piece of work, Williams; it has quite a feeling of the romantic period. The light is admirably managed, it seems to me, and the figure, though it's rather too grotesque, is somehow very impressive.'

'Yes, isn't it?' said Williams, who was just then busy giving whisky and soda to others of the company, and was unable to come across the room to look at the view again.

It was by this time rather late in the evening, and the visitors were on the move. After they went Williams was obliged to write a letter or two and clear up some odd bits of work. At last, some time past midnight, he was disposed to turn in, and he put out his lamp after lighting his bedroom candle. The picture lay face upwards on the table where the last man who looked at it had put it, and it caught his eye as he turned the lamp down. What he saw made him very nearly drop the candle on the floor, and he declares now if he had been left in the dark at that moment he would have had a fit. But, as that did not happen, he was able to put down the light on the table and take a good look at the picture. It was indubitable— rankly impossible, no doubt, but absolutely certain. In the middle of the lawn in front of the unknown house there was a figure where no figure had been at five o'clock that afternoon. It was crawling on all fours towards the house, and it was muffled in a strange black garment with a white cross on the back.

I do not know what is the ideal course to pursue in a situation of this kind, I can only tell you what Mr Williams did. He took the picture by one corner and carried it across the passage to a second set of rooms which he possessed. There he locked it up in a drawer, sported the doors of both sets of rooms, and retired to bed; but first he wrote out and signed an account of the extraordinary change which the picture had undergone since it had come into his possession.

Sleep visited him rather late; but it was consoling to reflect that the behaviour of the picture did not depend upon his own unsupported testimony. Evidently the man who had looked at it the night before had seen something of the same kind as he had, otherwise he might have been tempted to think that something gravely wrong was happening either to his eyes or

his mind. This possibility being fortunately precluded, two matters awaited him on the morrow. He must take stock of the picture very carefully, and call in a witness for the purpose, and he must make a determined effort to ascertain what house it was that was represented. He would therefore ask his neighbour Nisbet to breakfast with him, and he would subsequently spend a morning over the gazetteer.

Nisbet was disengaged, and arrived about 9.20. His host was not quite dressed, I am sorry to say, even at this late hour. During breakfast nothing was said about the mezzotint by Williams, save that he had a picture on which he wished for Nisbet's opinion. But those who are familiar with University life can picture for themselves the wide and delightful range of subjects over which the conversation of two Fellows of Canterbury College is likely to extend during a Sunday morning breakfast. Hardly a topic was left unchallenged, from golf to lawn-tennis. Yet I am bound to say that Williams was rather distraught; for his interest naturally centred in that very strange picture which was now reposing, face downwards, in the drawer in the room opposite.

The morning pipe was at last lighted, and the moment had arrived for which he looked. With very considerable— almost tremulous— excitement he ran across, unlocked the drawer, and, extracting the picture— still face downwards— ran back, and put it into Nisbet's hands.

'Now,' he said, 'Nisbet, I want you to tell me exactly what you see in that picture. Describe it, if you don't mind, rather minutely. I'll tell you why afterwards.'

'Well,' said Nisbet, 'I have here a view of a country-house— English, I presume— by moonlight.'

'Moonlight? You're sure of that?'

'Certainly. The moon appears to be on the wane, if you wish for details, and there are clouds in the sky.'

'All right. Go on. I'll swear,' added Williams in an aside, 'there was no moon when I saw it first.'

'Well, there's not much more to be said,' Nisbet continued. 'The house has one— two— three rows of windows, five in each row, except at the bottom, where there's a porch instead of the middle one, and— '

‘But what about figures?’ said Williams, with marked interest.

‘There aren’t any,’ said Nisbet; ‘but— ’

‘What! No figure on the grass in front?’

‘Not a thing.’

‘You’ll swear to that?’

‘Certainly I will. But there’s just one other thing.’

‘What?’

‘Why, one of the windows on the ground-floor— left of the door— is open.’

‘Is it really so? My goodness! he must have got in,’ said Williams, with great excitement; and he hurried to the back of the sofa on which Nisbet was sitting, and, catching the picture from him, verified the matter for himself.

It was quite true. There was no figure, and there was the open window. Williams, after a moment of speechless surprise, went to the writing-table and scribbled for a short time. Then he brought two papers to Nisbet, and asked him first to sign one— it was his own description of the picture, which you have just heard— and then to read the other which was Williams’s statement written the night before.

‘What can it all mean?’ said Nisbet.

‘Exactly,’ said Williams. ’Well, one thing I must do— or three things, now I think of it. I must find out from Garwood’— this was his last night’s visitor— ’what he saw, and then I must get the thing photographed before it goes further, and then I must find out what the place is.’

‘I can do the photographing myself,’ said Nisbet, ’and I will. But, you know, it looks very much as if we were assisting at the working out of a tragedy somewhere. The question is, has it happened already, or is it going to come off? You must find out what the place is. Yes,’ he said, looking at the picture again, ’I expect you’re right: he has got in. And if I don’t mistake, there’ll be the devil to pay in one of the rooms upstairs.’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ said Williams: ’I’ll take the picture across to old Green’ (this was the senior Fellow of the College, who had been Bursar for many years). ’It’s quite likely he’ll know it. We have property in Essex and Sussex, and he must have been over the two counties a lot in his time.’

‘Quite likely he will,’ said Nisbet; ’but just let me take my photograph first. But look here, I rather think Green isn’t up today. He wasn’t in Hall last night, and I think I heard him say he was going down for the Sunday.’

‘That’s true, too,’ said Williams; ’I know he’s gone to Brighton. Well, if you’ll photograph it now, I’ll go across to Garwood and get his statement, and you keep an eye on it while I’m gone. I’m beginning to think two guineas is not a very exorbitant price for it now.’

In a short time he had returned, and brought Mr Garwood with him. Garwood’s statement was to the effect that the figure, when he had seen it, was clear of the edge of the picture, but had not got far across the lawn. He remembered a white mark on the back of its drapery, but could not have been sure it was a cross. A document to this effect was then drawn up and signed, and Nisbet proceeded to photograph the picture.

‘Now what do you mean to do?’ he said. ’Are you going to sit and watch it all day?’

‘Well, no, I think not,’ said Williams. ’I rather imagine we’re meant to see the whole thing. You see, between the time I saw it last night and this morning there was time for lots of things to happen, but the creature only got into the house. It could easily have got through its business in the time and gone to its own place again; but the fact of the window being open, I think, must mean that it’s in there now. So I feel quite easy about leaving it. And besides, I have a kind of idea that it wouldn’t change much, if at all, in the daytime. We might go out for a walk this afternoon, and come in to tea, or whenever it gets dark. I shall leave it out on the table here, and sport the door. My skip can get in, but no one else.’

The three agreed that this would be a good plan; and, further, that if they spent the afternoon together they would be less likely to talk about the business to other people; for any rumour of such a transaction as was going on would bring the whole of the Phasmatological Society about their ears.

We may give them a respite until five o’clock.

At or near that hour the three were entering Williams’s staircase. They were at first slightly annoyed to see that the door of his rooms was unsported; but in a moment it was remembered that on Sunday the skips came for orders an hour or so earlier

than on weekdays. However, a surprise was awaiting them. The first thing they saw was the picture leaning up against a pile of books on the table, as it had been left, and the next thing was Williams's skip, seated on a chair opposite, gazing at it with undisguised horror. How was this? Mr Filcher (the name is not my own invention) was a servant of considerable standing, and set the standard of etiquette to all his own college and to several neighbouring ones, and nothing could be more alien to his practice than to be found sitting on his master's chair, or appearing to take any particular notice of his master's furniture or pictures. Indeed, he seemed to feel this himself. He started violently when the three men were in the room, and got up with a marked effort. Then he said:

'I ask your pardon, sir, for taking such a freedom as to set down.'

'Not at all, Robert,' interposed Mr Williams. 'I was meaning to ask you some time what you thought of that picture.'

'Well, sir, of course I don't set up my opinion against yours, but it ain't the pictur I should 'ang where my little girl could see it, sir.'

'Wouldn't you, Robert? Why not?'

'No, sir. Why, the pore child, I recollect once she see a Door Bible, with pictures not 'alf what that is, and we 'ad to set up with her three or four nights afterwards, if you'll believe me; and if she was to ketch a sight of this skelinton here, or whatever it is, carrying off the pore baby, she would be in a taking. You know 'ow it is with children; 'ow nervish they git with a little thing and all. But what I should say, it don't seem a right pictur to be laying about, sir, not where anyone that's liable to be startled could come on it. Should you be wanting anything this evening, sir? Thank you, sir.'

With these words the excellent man went to continue the round of his masters, and you may be sure the gentlemen whom he left lost no time in gathering round the engraving. There was the house, as before under the waning moon and the drifting clouds. The window that had been open was shut, and the figure was once more on the lawn: but not this time crawling cautiously on hands and knees. Now it was erect and stepping swiftly, with long strides, towards the front of the picture. The moon was behind it, and the black drapery hung

down over its face so that only hints of that could be seen, and what was visible made the spectators profoundly thankful that they could see no more than a white dome-like forehead and a few straggling hairs. The head was bent down, and the arms were tightly clasped over an object which could be dimly seen and identified as a child, whether dead or living it was not possible to say. The legs of the appearance alone could be plainly discerned, and they were horribly thin.

From five to seven the three companions sat and watched the picture by turns. But it never changed. They agreed at last that it would be safe to leave it, and that they would return after Hall and await further developments.

When they assembled again, at the earliest possible moment, the engraving was there, but the figure was gone, and the house was quiet under the moonbeams. There was nothing for it but to spend the evening over gazetteers and guide-books. Williams was the lucky one at last, and perhaps he deserved it. At 11.30 p.m. he read from Murray's *Guide to Essex*the following lines:

> 16-1/2 miles, *Anningley*. The church has been an interesting building of Norman date, but was extensively classicized in the last century. It contains the tomb of the family of Francis, whose mansion, Anningley Hall, a solid Queen Anne house, stands immediately beyond the churchyard in a park of about 80 acres. The family is now extinct, the last heir having disappeared mysteriously in infancy in the year 1802. The father, Mr Arthur Francis, was locally known as a talented amateur engraver in mezzotint. After his son's disappearance he lived in complete retirement at the Hall, and was found dead in his studio on the third anniversary of the disaster, having just completed an engraving of the house, impressions of which are of considerable rarity.

This looked like business, and, indeed, Mr Green on his return at once identified the house as Anningley Hall.

'Is there any kind of explanation of the figure, Green?' was the question which Williams naturally asked.

’I don’t know, I’m sure, Williams. What used to be said in the place when I first knew it, which was before I came up here, was just this: old Francis was always very much down on these poaching fellows, and whenever he got a chance he used to get a man whom he suspected of it turned off the estate, and by degrees he got rid of them all but one. Squires could do a lot of things then that they daren’t think of now. Well, this man that was left was what you find pretty often in that country— the last remains of a very old family. I believe they were Lords of the Manor at one time. I recollect just the same thing in my own parish.’

‘What, like the man in *Tess o’ the Durbervilles*?’ Williams put in.

’Yes, I dare say; it’s not a book I could ever read myself. But this fellow could show a row of tombs in the church there that belonged to his ancestors, and all that went to sour him a bit; but Francis, they said, could never get at him— he always kept just on the right side of the law— until one night the keepers found him at it in a wood right at the end of the estate. I could show you the place now; it marches with some land that used to belong to an uncle of mine. And you can imagine there was a row; and this man Gawdy (that was the name, to be sure— Gawdy; I thought I should get it— Gawdy), he was unlucky enough, poor chap! to shoot a keeper. Well, that was what Francis wanted, and grand juries— you know what they would have been then— and poor Gawdy was strung up in double-quick time; and I’ve been shown the place he was buried in, on the north side of the church— you know the way in that part of the world: anyone that’s been hanged or made away with themselves, they bury them that side. And the idea was that some friend of Gawdy’s— not a relation, because he had none, poor devil! he was the last of his line: kind of *spes ultima gentis*— must have planned to get hold of Francis’s boy and put an end to *his* line, too. I don’t know— it’s rather an out-of-the-way thing for an Essex poacher to think of— but, you know, I should say now it looks more as if old Gawdy had managed the job himself. Booh! I hate to think of it! have some whisky, Williams!’

The facts were communicated by Williams to Dennistoun, and by him to a mixed company, of which I was one, and the

Sadducean Professor of Ophiology another. I am sorry to say that the latter when asked what he thought of it, only remarked: ’Oh, those Bridgeford people will say anything’— a sentiment which met with the reception it deserved.

I have only to add that the picture is now in the Ashleian Museum; that it has been treated with a view to discovering whether sympathetic ink has been used in it, but without effect; that Mr Britnell knew nothing of it save that he was sure it was uncommon; and that, though carefully watched, it has never been known to change again.

THE ASH-TREE

Everyone who has travelled over Eastern England knows the smaller country-houses with which it is studded— the rather dank little buildings, usually in the Italian style, surrounded with parks of some eighty to a hundred acres. For me they have always had a very strong attraction, with the grey paling of split oak, the noble trees, the mères with their reed-beds, and the line of distant woods. Then, I like the pillared portico— perhaps stuck on to a red-brick Queen Anne house which has been faced with stucco to bring it into line with the 'Grecian' taste of the end of the eighteenth century; the hall inside, going up to the roof, which hall ought always to be provided with a gallery and a small organ. I like the library, too, where you may find anything from a Psalter of the thirteenth century to a Shakespeare quarto. I like the pictures, of course; and perhaps most of all I like fancying what life in such a house was when it was first built, and in the piping times of landlords' prosperity, and not least now, when, if money is not so plentiful, taste is more varied and life quite as interesting. I wish to have one of these houses, and enough money to keep it together and entertain my friends in it modestly.

But this is a digression. I have to tell you of a curious series of events which happened in such a house as I have tried to describe. It is Castringham Hall in Suffolk. I think a good deal has been done to the building since the period of my story, but the essential features I have sketched are still there— Italian portico, square block of white house, older inside than out, park with fringe of woods, and mere. The one feature that marked out the house from a score of others is gone. As you looked at it from the park, you saw on the right a great old ash-tree growing within half a dozen yards of the wall, and almost or quite touching the building with its branches. I suppose it had stood there ever since Castringham ceased to be a fortified place, and since the moat was filled in and the Elizabethan dwelling-house built. At any rate, it had well-nigh attained its full dimensions in the year 1690.

In that year the district in which the Hall is situated was the scene of a number of witch-trials. It will be long, I think, before we arrive at a just estimate of the amount of solid reason— if

there was any— which lay at the root of the universal fear of witches in old times. Whether the persons accused of this offence really did imagine that they were possessed of unusual power of any kind; or whether they had the will at least, if not the power, of doing mischief to their neighbours; or whether all the confessions, of which there are so many, were extorted by the cruelty of the witch-finders— these are questions which are not, I fancy, yet solved. And the present narrative gives me pause. I cannot altogether sweep it away as mere invention. The reader must judge for himself.

Castringham contributed a victim to the *auto-da-fé*. Mrs Mothersole was her name, and she differed from the ordinary run of village witches only in being rather better off and in a more influential position. Efforts were made to save her by several reputable farmers of the parish. They did their best to testify to her character, and showed considerable anxiety as to the verdict of the jury.

But what seems to have been fatal to the woman was the evidence of the then proprietor of Castringham Hall— Sir Matthew Fell. He deposed to having watched her on three different occasions from his window, at the full of the moon, gathering sprigs ‘from the ash-tree near my house’. She had climbed into the branches, clad only in her shift, and was cutting off small twigs with a peculiarly curved knife, and as she did so she seemed to be talking to herself. On each occasion Sir Matthew had done his best to capture the woman, but she had always taken alarm at some accidental noise he had made, and all he could see when he got down to the garden was a hare running across the path in the direction of the village.

On the third night he had been at the pains to follow at his best speed, and had gone straight to Mrs Mothersole’s house; but he had had to wait a quarter of an hour battering at her door, and then she had come out very cross, and apparently very sleepy, as if just out of bed; and he had no good explanation to offer of his visit.

Mainly on this evidence, though there was much more of a less striking and unusual kind from other parishioners, Mrs Mothersole was found guilty and condemned to die. She was hanged a week after the trial, with five or six more unhappy creatures, at Bury St Edmunds.

Sir Matthew Fell, then Deputy-Sheriff, was present at the execution. It was a damp, drizzly March morning when the cart made its way up the rough grass hill outside Northgate, where the gallows stood. The other victims were apathetic or broken down with misery; but Mrs Mothersole was, as in life so in death, of a very different temper. Her ‘poysonous Rage’, as a reporter of the time puts it, ’did so work upon the Bystanders— yea, even upon the Hangman— that it was constantly affirmed of all that saw her that she presented the living Aspect of a mad Divell. Yet she offer’d no Resistance to the Officers of the Law; onely she looked upon those that laid Hands upon her with so direfull and venomous an Aspect that— as one of them afterwards assured me— the meer Thought of it preyed inwardly upon his Mind for six Months after.’

However, all that she is reported to have said were the seemingly meaningless words: ‘There will be guests at the Hall.’ Which she repeated more than once in an undertone.

Sir Matthew Fell was not unimpressed by the bearing of the woman. He had some talk upon the matter with the Vicar of his parish, with whom he travelled home after the assize business was over. His evidence at the trial had not been very willingly given; he was not specially infected with the witch-finding mania, but he declared, then and afterwards, that he could not give any other account of the matter than that he had given, and that he could not possibly have been mistaken as to what he saw. The whole transaction had been repugnant to him, for he was a man who liked to be on pleasant terms with those about him; but he saw a duty to be done in this business, and he had done it. That seems to have been the gist of his sentiments, and the Vicar applauded it, as any reasonable man must have done.

A few weeks after, when the moon of May was at the full, Vicar and Squire met again in the park, and walked to the Hall together. Lady Fell was with her mother, who was dangerously ill, and Sir Matthew was alone at home; so the Vicar, Mr Crome, was easily persuaded to take a late supper at the Hall.

Sir Matthew was not very good company this evening. The talk ran chiefly on family and parish matters, and, as luck would have it, Sir Matthew made a memorandum in writing of

certain wishes or intentions of his regarding his estates, which afterwards proved exceedingly useful.

When Mr Crome thought of starting for home, about half past nine o'clock, Sir Matthew and he took a preliminary turn on the gravelled walk at the back of the house. The only incident that struck Mr Crome was this: they were in sight of the ash-tree which I described as growing near the windows of the building, when Sir Matthew stopped and said:

'What is that that runs up and down the stem of the ash? It is never a squirrel? They will all be in their nests by now.'

The Vicar looked and saw the moving creature, but he could make nothing of its colour in the moonlight. The sharp outline, however, seen for an instant, was imprinted on his brain, and he could have sworn, he said, though it sounded foolish, that, squirrel or not, it had more than four legs.

Still, not much was to be made of the momentary vision, and the two men parted. They may have met since then, but it was not for a score of years.

Next day Sir Matthew Fell was not downstairs at six in the morning, as was his custom, nor at seven, nor yet at eight. Hereupon the servants went and knocked at his chamber door. I need not prolong the description of their anxious listenings and renewed batterings on the panels. The door was opened at last from the outside, and they found their master dead and black. So much you have guessed. That there were any marks of violence did not at the moment appear; but the window was open.

One of the men went to fetch the parson, and then by his directions rode on to give notice to the coroner. Mr Crome himself went as quick as he might to the Hall, and was shown to the room where the dead man lay. He has left some notes among his papers which show how genuine a respect and sorrow was felt for Sir Matthew, and there is also this passage, which I transcribe for the sake of the light it throws upon the course of events, and also upon the common beliefs of the time:

'There was not any the least Trace of an Entrance having been forc'd to the Chamber: but the Casement stood open, as my poor Friend would always have it in this Season. He had his Evening Drink of small Ale in a silver vessel of about a pint

measure, and tonight had not drunk it out. This Drink was examined by the Physician from Bury, a Mr Hodgkins, who could not, however, as he afterwards declar'd upon his Oath, before the Coroner's quest, discover that any matter of a venomous kind was present in it. For, as was natural, in the great Swelling and Blackness of the Corpse, there was talk made among the Neighbours of Poyson. The Body was very much Disorder'd as it laid in the Bed, being twisted after so extream a sort as gave too probable Conjecture that my worthy Friend and Patron had expir'd in great Pain and Agony. And what is as yet unexplain'd, and to myself the Argument of some Horrid and Artfull Désigne in the Perpetrators of this Barbarous Murther, was this, that the Women which were entrusted with the laying-out of the Corpse and washing it, being both sad Pearsons and very well Respected in their Mournfull Profession, came to me in a great Pain and Distress both of Mind and Body, saying, what was indeed confirmed upon the first View, that they had no sooner touch'd the Breast of the Corpse with their naked Hands than they were sensible of a more than ordinary violent Smart and Acheing in their Palms, which, with their whole Forearms, in no long time swell'd so immoderately, the Pain still continuing, that, as afterwards proved, during many weeks they were forc'd to lay by the exercise of their Calling; and yet no mark seen on the Skin.

'Upon hearing this, I sent for the Physician, who was still in the House, and we made as carefull a Proof as we were able by the Help of a small Magnifying Lens of Crystal of the condition of the Skinn on this Part of the Body: but could not detect with the Instrument we had any Matter of Importance beyond a couple of small Punctures or Pricks, which we then concluded were the Spotts by which the Poyson might be introduced, remembering that Ring of *Pope Borgia*, with other known Specimens of the Horrid Art of the Italian Poysoners of the last age.

'So much is to be said of the Symptoms seen on the Corpse. As to what I am to add, it is meerly my own Experiment, and to be left to Posterity to judge whether there be anything of Value therein. There was on the Table by the Beddside a Bible of the small size, in which my Friend— punctuall as in Matters of less Moment, so in this more weighty one— used nightly, and upon his First Rising, to read a sett Portion. And I taking it up— not

without a Tear duly paid to him wich from the Study of this poorer Adumbration was now pass'd to the contemplation of its great Originall— it came into my Thoughts, as at such moments of Helplessness we are prone to catch at any the least Glimmer that makes promise of Light, to make trial of that old and by many accounted Superstitious Practice of drawing the *Sortes;*of which a Principall Instance, in the case of his late Sacred Majesty the Blessed Martyr King *Charles* and my Lord *Falkland*, was now much talked of. I must needs admit that by my Trial not much Assistance was afforded me: yet, as the Cause and Origin of these Dreadfull Events may hereafter be search'd out, I set down the Results, in the case it may be found that they pointed the true Quarter of the Mischief to a quicker Intelligence than my own.

'I made, then, three trials, opening the Book and placing my Finger upon certain Words: which gave in the first these words, from Luke xiii. 7, *Cut it down*; in the second, Isaiah xiii. 20, *It shall never be inhabited*; and upon the third Experiment, Job xxxix. 30, *Her young ones also suck up blood*.'

This is all that need be quoted from Mr Crome's papers. Sir Matthew Fell was duly coffined and laid into the earth, and his funeral sermon, preached by Mr Crome on the following Sunday, has been printed under the title of 'The Unsearchable Way; or, England's Danger and the Malicious Dealings of Antichrist', it being the Vicar's view, as well as that most commonly held in the neighbourhood, that the Squire was the victim of a recrudescence of the Popish Plot.

His son, Sir Matthew the second, succeeded to the title and estates. And so ends the first act of the Castringham tragedy. It is to be mentioned, though the fact is not surprising, that the new Baronet did not occupy the room in which his father had died. Nor, indeed, was it slept in by anyone but an occasional visitor during the whole of his occupation. He died in 1735, and I do not find that anything particular marked his reign, save a curiously constant mortality among his cattle and livestock in general, which showed a tendency to increase slightly as time went on.

Those who are interested in the details will find a statistical account in a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1772, which draws the facts from the Baronet's own papers. He put an end

to it at last by a very simple expedient, that of shutting up all his beasts in sheds at night, and keeping no sheep in his park. For he had noticed that nothing was ever attacked that spent the night indoors. After that the disorder confined itself to wild birds, and beasts of chase. But as we have no good account of the symptoms, and as all-night watching was quite unproductive of any clue, I do not dwell on what the Suffolk farmers called the ‘Castringham sickness’.

The second Sir Matthew died in 1735, as I said, and was duly succeeded by his son, Sir Richard. It was in his time that the great family pew was built out on the north side of the parish church. So large were the Squire’s ideas that several of the graves on that unhallowed side of the building had to be disturbed to satisfy his requirements. Among them was that of Mrs Mothersole, the position of which was accurately known, thanks to a note on a plan of the church and yard, both made by Mr Crome.

A certain amount of interest was excited in the village when it was known that the famous witch, who was still remembered by a few, was to be exhumed. And the feeling of surprise, and indeed disquiet, was very strong when it was found that, though her coffin was fairly sound and unbroken, there was no trace whatever inside it of body, bones, or dust. Indeed, it is a curious phenomenon, for at the time of her burying no such things were dreamt of as resurrection-men, and it is difficult to conceive any rational motive for stealing a body otherwise than for the uses of the dissecting-room.

The incident revived for a time all the stories of witch-trials and of the exploits of the witches, dormant for forty years, and Sir Richard’s orders that the coffin should be burnt were thought by a good many to be rather foolhardy, though they were duly carried out.

Sir Richard was a pestilent innovator, it is certain. Before his time the Hall had been a fine block of the mellowest red brick; but Sir Richard had travelled in Italy and become infected with the Italian taste, and, having more money than his predecessors, he determined to leave an Italian palace where he had found an English house. So stucco and ashlar masked the brick; some indifferent Roman marbles were planted about in the entrance-hall and gardens; a reproduction of the Sibyl’s

temple at Tivoli was erected on the opposite bank of the mere; and Castringham took on an entirely new, and, I must say, a less engaging, aspect. But it was much admired, and served as a model to a good many of the neighbouring gentry in after-years.

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One morning (it was in 1754) Sir Richard woke after a night of discomfort. It had been windy, and his chimney had smoked persistently, and yet it was so cold that he must keep up a fire. Also something had so rattled about the window that no man could get a moment's peace. Further, there was the prospect of several guests of position arriving in the course of the day, who would expect sport of some kind, and the inroads of the distemper (which continued among his game) had been lately so serious that he was afraid for his reputation as a game-preserver. But what really touched him most nearly was the other matter of his sleepless night. He could certainly not sleep in that room again.

That was the chief subject of his meditations at breakfast, and after it he began a systematic examination of the rooms to see which would suit his notions best. It was long before he found one. This had a window with an eastern aspect and that with a northern; this door the servants would be always passing, and he did not like the bedstead in that. No, he must have a room with a western look-out, so that the sun could not wake him early, and it must be out of the way of the business of the house. The housekeeper was at the end of her resources.

'Well, Sir Richard,' she said, 'you know that there is but the one room like that in the house.'

'Which may that be?' said Sir Richard.

'And that is Sir Matthew's— the West Chamber.'

'Well, put me in there, for there I'll lie tonight,' said her master. 'Which way is it? Here, to be sure'; and he hurried off.

'Oh, Sir Richard, but no one has slept there these forty years. The air has hardly been changed since Sir Matthew died there.'

Thus she spoke, and rustled after him.

'Come, open the door, Mrs Chiddock. I'll see the chamber, at least.'

So it was opened, and, indeed, the smell was very close and earthy. Sir Richard crossed to the window, and, impatiently, as was his wont, threw the shutters back, and flung open the casement. For this end of the house was one which the alterations had barely touched, grown up as it was with the great ash-tree, and being otherwise concealed from view.

'Air it, Mrs Chiddock, all today, and move my bed-furniture in in the afternoon. Put the Bishop of Kilmore in my old room.'

'Pray, Sir Richard,' said a new voice, breaking in on this speech, 'might I have the favour of a moment's interview?'

Sir Richard turned round and saw a man in black in the doorway, who bowed.

'I must ask your indulgence for this intrusion, Sir Richard. You will, perhaps, hardly remember me. My name is William Crome, and my grandfather was Vicar in your grandfather's time.'

'Well, sir,' said Sir Richard, 'the name of Crome is always a passport to Castringham. I am glad to renew a friendship of two generations' standing. In what can I serve you? for your hour of calling— and, if I do not mistake you, your bearing— shows you to be in some haste.'

'That is no more than the truth, sir. I am riding from Norwich to Bury St Edmunds with what haste I can make, and I have called in on my way to leave with you some papers which we have but just come upon in looking over what my grandfather left at his death. It is thought you may find some matters of family interest in them.'

'You are mighty obliging, Mr Crome, and, if you will be so good as to follow me to the parlour, and drink a glass of wine, we will take a first look at these same papers together. And you, Mrs Chiddock, as I said, be about airing this chamber… . Yes, it is here my grandfather died… . Yes, the tree, perhaps, does make the place a little dampish… . No; I do not wish to listen to any more. Make no difficulties, I beg. You have your orders— go. Will you follow me, sir?'

They went to the study. The packet which young Mr Crome had brought— he was then just become a Fellow of Clare Hall in Cambridge, I may say, and subsequently brought out a respectable edition of Polyaenus— contained among other things the notes which the old Vicar had made upon the occasion of

Sir Matthew Fell's death. And for the first time Sir Richard was confronted with the enigmatical *Sortes Biblicae* which you have heard. They amused him a good deal.

'Well,' he said, 'my grandfather's Bible gave one prudent piece of advice—Such a nest of catarrhs and agues was never seen.'

The parlour contained the family books, which, pending the arrival of a collection which Sir Richard had made in Italy, and the building of a proper room to receive them, were not many in number.

Sir Richard looked up from the paper to the bookcase.

'I wonder,' says he, 'whether the old prophet is there yet? I fancy I see him.'

Crossing the room, he took out a dumpy Bible, which, sure enough, bore on the flyleaf the inscription: 'To Matthew Fell, from his Loving Godmother, Anne Aldous, 2 September 1659.'

'It would be no bad plan to test him again, Mr Crome. I will wager we get a couple of names in the Chronicles. H'm! what have we here? "Thou shalt seek me in the morning, and I shall not be." Well, well! Your grandfather would have made a fine omen of that, hey? No more prophets for me! They are all in a tale. And now, Mr Crome, I am infinitely obliged to you for your packet. You will, I fear, be impatient to get on. Pray allow me— another glass.'

So with offers of hospitality, which were genuinely meant (for Sir Richard thought well of the young man's address and manner), they parted.

In the afternoon came the guests— the Bishop of Kilmore, Lady Mary Hervey, Sir William Kentfield, *etc*. Dinner at five, wine, cards, supper, and dispersal to bed.

Next morning Sir Richard is disinclined to take his gun with the rest. He talks with the Bishop of Kilmore. This prelate, unlike a good many of the Irish Bishops of his day, had visited his see, and, indeed, resided there, for some considerable time. This morning, as the two were walking along the terrace and talking over the alterations and improvements in the house, the Bishop said, pointing to the window of the West Room:

'You could never get one of my Irish flock to occupy that room, Sir Richard.'

'Why is that, my lord? It is, in fact, my own.'

’Well, our Irish peasantry will always have it that it brings the worst of luck to sleep near an ash-tree, and you have a fine growth of ash not two yards from your chamber window. Perhaps,’ the Bishop went on, with a smile, ’it has given you a touch of its quality already, for you do not seem, if I may say it, so much the fresher for your night’s rest as your friends would like to see you.’

’That, or something else, it is true, cost me my sleep from twelve to four, my lord. But the tree is to come down tomorrow, so I shall not hear much more from it.’

’I applaud your determination. It can hardly be wholesome to have the air you breathe strained, as it were, through all that leafage.’

’Your lordship is right there, I think. But I had not my window open last night. It was rather the noise that went on— no doubt from the twigs sweeping the glass—that kept me open-eyed.’

’I think that can hardly be, Sir Richard. Here— you see it from this point. None of these nearest branches even can touch your casement unless there were a gale, and there was none of that last night. They miss the panes by a foot.’

’No, sir, true. What, then, will it be, I wonder, that scratched and rustled so— ay, and covered the dust on my sill with lines and marks?’

At last they agreed that the rats must have come up through the ivy. That was the Bishop’s idea, and Sir Richard jumped at it.

So the day passed quietly, and night came, and the party dispersed to their rooms, and wished Sir Richard a better night.

And now we are in his bedroom, with the light out and the Squire in bed. The room is over the kitchen, and the night outside still and warm, so the window stands open.

There is very little light about the bedstead, but there is a strange movement there; it seems as if Sir Richard were moving his head rapidly to and fro with only the slightest possible sound. And now you would guess, so deceptive is the half-darkness, that he had several heads, round and brownish, which move back and forward, even as low as his chest. It is a horrible illusion. Is it nothing more? There! something drops off the bed with a soft plump, like a kitten, and is out of the

window in a flash; another— four— and after that there is quiet again.

Thou shall seek me in the morning, and I shall not be.

As with Sir Matthew, so with Sir Richard— dead and black in his bed!

A pale and silent party of guests and servants gathered under the window when the news was known. Italian poisoners, Popish emissaries, infected air— all these and more guesses were hazarded, and the Bishop of Kilmore looked at the tree, in the fork of whose lower boughs a white tom-cat was crouching, looking down the hollow which years had gnawed in the trunk. It was watching something inside the tree with great interest.

Suddenly it got up and craned over the hole. Then a bit of the edge on which it stood gave way, and it went slithering in. Everyone looked up at the noise of the fall.

It is known to most of us that a cat can cry; but few of us have heard, I hope, such a yell as came out of the trunk of the great ash. Two or three screams there were— the witnesses are not sure which— and then a slight and muffled noise of some commotion or struggling was all that came. But Lady Mary Hervey fainted outright, and the housekeeper stopped her ears and fled till she fell on the terrace.

The Bishop of Kilmore and Sir William Kentfield stayed. Yet even they were daunted, though it was only at the cry of a cat; and Sir William swallowed once or twice before he could say:

'There is something more than we know of in that tree, my lord. I am for an instant search.'

And this was agreed upon. A ladder was brought, and one of the gardeners went up, and, looking down the hollow, could detect nothing but a few dim indications of something moving. They got a lantern, and let it down by a rope.

'We must get at the bottom of this. My life upon it, my lord, but the secret of these terrible deaths is there.'

Up went the gardener again with the lantern, and let it down the hole cautiously. They saw the yellow light upon his face as he bent over, and saw his face struck with an incredulous terror and loathing before he cried out in a dreadful voice and fell back from the ladder— where, happily, he was caught by two of the men—letting the lantern fall inside the tree.

He was in a dead faint, and it was some time before any word could be got from him.

By then they had something else to look at. The lantern must have broken at the bottom, and the light in it caught upon dry leaves and rubbish that lay there for in a few minutes a dense smoke began to come up, and then flame; and, to be short, the tree was in a blaze.

The bystanders made a ring at some yards' distance, and Sir William and the Bishop sent men to get what weapons and tools they could; for, clearly, whatever might be using the tree as its lair would be forced out by the fire.

So it was. First, at the fork, they saw a round body covered with fire— the size of a man's head— appear very suddenly, then seem to collapse and fall back. This, five or six times; then a similar ball leapt into the air and fell on the grass, where after a moment it lay still. The Bishop went as near as he dared to it, and saw— what but the remains of an enormous spider, veinous and seared! And, as the fire burned lower down, more terrible bodies like this began to break out from the trunk, and it was seen that these were covered with greyish hair.

All that day the ash burned, and until it fell to pieces the men stood about it, and from time to time killed the brutes as they darted out. At last there was a long interval when none appeared, and they cautiously closed in and examined the roots of the tree.

'They found,' says the Bishop of Kilmore, 'below it a rounded hollow place in the earth, wherein were two or three bodies of these creatures that had plainly been smothered by the smoke; and, what is to me more curious, at the side of this den, against the wall, was crouching the anatomy or skeleton of a human being, with the skin dried upon the bones, having some remains of black hair, which was pronounced by those that examined it to be undoubtedly the body of a woman, and clearly dead for a period of fifty years.'

NUMBER 13

Among the towns of Jutland, Viborg justly holds a high place. It is the seat of a bishopric; it has a handsome but almost entirely new cathedral, a charming garden, a lake of great beauty, and many storks. Near it is Hald, accounted one of the prettiest things in Denmark; and hard by is Finderup, where Marsk Stig murdered King Erik Glipping on St Cecilia's Day, in the year 1286. Fifty-six blows of square-headed iron maces were traced on Erik's skull when his tomb was opened in the seventeenth century. But I am not writing a guide-book.

There are good hotels in Viborg— Preisler's and the Phoenix are all that can be desired. But my cousin, whose experiences I have to tell you now, went to the Golden Lion the first time that he visited Viborg. He has not been there since, and the following pages will, perhaps, explain the reason of his abstention.

The Golden Lion is one of the very few houses in the town that were not destroyed in the great fire of 1726, which practically demolished the cathedral, the Sognekirke, the Raadhuus, and so much else that was old and interesting. It is a great red-brick house— that is, the front is of brick, with corbie steps on the gables and a text over the door; but the courtyard into which the omnibus drives is of black and white wood and plaster.

The sun was declining in the heavens when my cousin walked up to the door, and the light smote full upon the imposing façade of the house. He was delighted with the old-fashioned aspect of the place, and promised himself a thoroughly satisfactory and amusing stay in an inn so typical of old Jutland.

It was not business in the ordinary sense of the word that had brought Mr Anderson to Viborg. He was engaged upon some researches into the Church history of Denmark, and it had come to his knowledge that in the Rigsarkiv of Viborg there were papers, saved from the fire, relating to the last days of Roman Catholicism in the country. He proposed, therefore, to spend a considerable time— perhaps as much as a fortnight or three weeks— in examining and copying these, and he hoped that the Golden Lion would be able to give him a room of sufficient size to serve alike as a bedroom and a study. His

wishes were explained to the landlord, and, after a certain amount of thought, the latter suggested that perhaps it might be the best way for the gentleman to look at one or two of the larger rooms and pick one for himself. It seemed a good idea.

The top floor was soon rejected as entailing too much getting upstairs after the day's work; the second floor contained no room of exactly the dimensions required; but on the first floor there was a choice of two or three rooms which would, so far as size went, suit admirably.

The landlord was strongly in favour of Number 17, but Mr Anderson pointed out that its windows commanded only the blank wall of the next house, and that it would be very dark in the afternoon. Either Number 12 or Number 14 would be better, for both of them looked on the street, and the bright evening light and the pretty view would more than compensate him for the additional amount of noise.

Eventually Number 12 was selected. Like its neighbours, it had three windows, all on one side of the room; it was fairly high and unusually long. There was, of course, no fireplace, but the stove was handsome and rather old— a cast-iron erection, on the side of which was a representation of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, and the inscription, 'I Bog Mose, Cap. 22,' above. Nothing else in the room was remarkable; the only interesting picture was an old coloured print of the town, date about 1820.

Supper-time was approaching, but when Anderson, refreshed by the ordinary ablutions, descended the staircase, there were still a few minutes before the bell rang. He devoted them to examining the list of his fellow-lodgers. As is usual in Denmark, their names were displayed on a large blackboard, divided into columns and lines, the numbers of the rooms being painted in at the beginning of each line. The list was not exciting. There was an advocate, or Sagförer, a German, and some bagmen from Copenhagen. The one and only point which suggested any food for thought was the absence of any Number 13 from the tale of the rooms, and even this was a thing which Anderson had already noticed half a dozen times in his experience of Danish hotels. He could not help wondering whether the objection to that particular number, common as it is, was so widespread and so strong as to make it difficult to let a room so ticketed, and he resolved to ask the landlord if he and his

colleagues in the profession had actually met with many clients who refused to be accommodated in the thirteenth room.

He had nothing to tell me (I am giving the story as I heard it from him) about what passed at supper, and the evening, which was spent in unpacking and arranging his clothes, books, and papers, was not more eventful. Towards eleven o'clock he resolved to go to bed, but with him, as with a good many other people nowadays, an almost necessary preliminary to bed, if he meant to sleep, was the reading of a few pages of print, and he now remembered that the particular book which he had been reading in the train, and which alone would satisfy him at that present moment, was in the pocket of his great-coat, then hanging on a peg outside the dining-room.

To run down and secure it was the work of a moment, and, as the passages were by no means dark, it was not difficult for him to find his way back to his own door. So, at least, he thought; but when he arrived there, and turned the handle, the door entirely refused to open, and he caught the sound of a hasty movement towards it from within. He had tried the wrong door, of course. Was his own room to the right or to the left? He glanced at the number: it was 13. His room would be on the left; and so it was. And not before he had been in bed for some minutes, had read his wonted three or four pages of his book, blown out his light, and turned over to go to sleep, did it occur to him that, whereas on the blackboard of the hotel there had been no Number 13, there was undoubtedly a room numbered 13 in the hotel. He felt rather sorry he had not chosen it for his own. Perhaps he might have done the landlord a little service by occupying it, and given him the chance of saying that a well-born English gentleman had lived in it for three weeks and liked it very much. But probably it was used as a servant's room or something of the kind. After all, it was most likely not so large or good a room as his own. And he looked drowsily about the room, which was fairly perceptible in the half-light from the street-lamp. It was a curious effect, he thought. Rooms usually look larger in a dim light than a full one, but this seemed to have contracted in length and grown proportionately higher. Well, well! sleep was more important than these vague ruminations— and to sleep he went.

On the day after his arrival Anderson attacked the Rigsarkiv of Viborg. He was, as one might expect in Denmark, kindly received, and access to all that he wished to see was made as easy for him as possible. The documents laid before him were far more numerous and interesting than he had at all anticipated. Besides official papers, there was a large bundle of correspondence relating to Bishop Jörgen Friis, the last Roman Catholic who held the see, and in these there cropped up many amusing and what are called ‘intimate’ details of private life and individual character. There was much talk of a house owned by the Bishop, but not inhabited by him, in the town. Its tenant was apparently somewhat of a scandal and a stumbling-block to the reforming party. He was a disgrace, they wrote, to the city; he practised secret and wicked arts, and had sold his soul to the enemy. It was of a piece with the gross corruption and superstition of the Babylonish Church that such a viper and blood-sucking *Troldmand* should be patronized and harboured by the Bishop. The Bishop met these reproaches boldly; he protested his own abhorrence of all such things as secret arts, and required his antagonists to bring the matter before the proper court— of course, the spiritual court— and sift it to the bottom. No one could be more ready and willing than himself to condemn Mag Nicolas Francken if the evidence showed him to have been guilty of any of the crimes informally alleged against him.

Anderson had not time to do more than glance at the next letter of the Protestant leader, Rasmus Nielsen, before the record office was closed for the day, but he gathered its general tenor, which was to the effect that Christian men were now no longer bound by the decisions of Bishops of Rome, and that the Bishop’s Court was not, and could not be, a fit or competent tribunal to judge so grave and weighty a cause.

On leaving the office, Mr Anderson was accompanied by the old gentleman who presided over it, and, as they walked, the conversation very naturally turned to the papers of which I have just been speaking.

Herr Scavenius, the Archivist of Viborg, though very well informed as to the general run of the documents under his charge, was not a specialist in those of the Reformation period. He was much interested in what Anderson had to tell him

about them. He looked forward with great pleasure, he said, to seeing the publication in which Mr Anderson spoke of embodying their contents. ‘This house of the Bishop Friis,’ he added, ’it is a great puzzle to me where it can have stood. I have studied carefully the topography of old Viborg, but it is most unlucky— of the old terrier of the Bishop’s property which was made in 1560, and of which we have the greater part in the Arkiv— just the piece which had the list of the town property is missing. Never mind. Perhaps I shall some day succeed to find him.’

After taking some exercise— I forget exactly how or where— Anderson went back to the Golden Lion, his supper, his game of patience, and his bed. On the way to his room it occurred to him that he had forgotten to talk to the landlord about the omission of Number 13 from the hotel board, and also that he might as well make sure that Number 13 did actually exist before he made any reference to the matter.

The decision was not difficult to arrive at. There was the door with its number as plain as could be, and work of some kind was evidently going on inside it, for as he neared the door he could hear footsteps and voices, or a voice, within. During the few seconds in which he halted to make sure of the number, the footsteps ceased, seemingly very near the door, and he was a little startled at hearing a quick hissing breathing as of a person in strong excitement. He went on to his own room, and again he was surprised to find how much smaller it seemed now than it had when he selected it. It was a slight disappointment, but only slight. If he found it really not large enough, he could very easily shift to another. In the meantime he wanted something— as far as I remember it was a pocket-handkerchief— out of his portmanteau, which had been placed by the porter on a very inadequate trestle or stool against the wall at the farthest end of the room from his bed. Here was a very curious thing: the portmanteau was not to be seen. It had been moved by officious servants; doubtless the contents had been put in the wardrobe. No, none of them were there. This was vexatious. The idea of a theft he dismissed at once. Such things rarely happen in Denmark, but some piece of stupidity had certainly been performed (which is not so uncommon), and the *stuepige* must be severely spoken to. Whatever it was that he wanted, it was not so necessary to his comfort that he could

not wait till the morning for it, and he therefore settled not to ring the bell and disturb the servants. He went to the window— the right-hand window it was— and looked out on the quiet street. There was a tall building opposite, with large spaces of dead wall; no passers-by; a dark night; and very little to be seen of any kind.

The light was behind him, and he could see his own shadow clearly cast on the wall opposite. Also the shadow of the bearded man in Number 11 on the left, who passed to and fro in shirtsleeves once or twice, and was seen first brushing his hair, and later on in a nightgown. Also the shadow of the occupant of Number 13 on the right. This might be more interesting. Number 13 was, like himself, leaning on his elbows on the window-sill looking out into the street. He seemed to be a tall thin man— or was it by any chance a woman?— at least, it was someone who covered his or her head with some kind of drapery before going to bed, and, he thought, must be possessed of a red lamp-shade— and the lamp must be flickering very much. There was a distinct playing up and down of a dull red light on the opposite wall. He craned out a little to see if he could make any more of the figure, but beyond a fold of some light, perhaps white, material on the window-sill he could see nothing.

Now came a distant step in the street, and its approach seemed to recall Number 13 to a sense of his exposed position, for very swiftly and suddenly he swept aside from the window, and his red light went out. Anderson, who had been smoking a cigarette, laid the end of it on the window-sill and went to bed.

Next morning he was woken by the *stuepige* with hot water, *etc*. He roused himself, and after thinking out the correct Danish words, said as distinctly as he could:

'You must not move my portmanteau. Where is it?'

As is not uncommon, the maid laughed, and went away without making any distinct answer.

Anderson, rather irritated, sat up in bed, intending to call her back, but he remained sitting up, staring straight in front of him. There was his portmanteau on its trestle, exactly where he had seen the porter put it when he first arrived. This was a rude shock for a man who prided himself on his accuracy of observation. How it could possibly have escaped him the night

before he did not pretend to understand; at any rate, there it was now.

The daylight showed more than the portmanteau; it let the true proportions of the room with its three windows appear, and satisfied its tenant that his choice after all had not been a bad one. When he was almost dressed he walked to the middle one of the three windows to look out at the weather. Another shock awaited him. Strangely unobservant he must have been last night. He could have sworn ten times over that he had been smoking at the right-hand window the last thing before he went to bed, and here was his cigarette-end on the sill of the middle window.

He started to go down to breakfast. Rather late, but Number 13 was later: here were his boots still outside his door— a gentleman's boots. So then Number 13 was a man, not a woman. Just then he caught sight of the number on the door. It was 14. He thought he must have passed Number 13 without noticing it. Three stupid mistakes in twelve hours were too much for a methodical, accurate-minded man, so he turned back to make sure. The next number to 14 was number 12, his own room. There was no Number 13 at all.

After some minutes devoted to a careful consideration of everything he had had to eat and drink during the last twenty-four hours, Anderson decided to give the question up. If his eyes or his brain were giving way he would have plenty of opportunities for ascertaining that fact; if not, then he was evidently being treated to a very interesting experience. In either case the development of events would certainly be worth watching.

During the day he continued his examination of the episcopal correspondence which I have already summarized. To his disappointment, it was incomplete. Only one other letter could be found which referred to the affair of Mag Nicolas Francken. It was from the Bishop Jörgen Friis to Rasmus Nielsen. He said:

'Although we are not in the least degree inclined to assent to your judgement concerning our court, and shall be prepared if need be to withstand you to the uttermost in that behalf, yet forasmuch as our trusty and well-beloved Mag Nicolas Francken, against whom you have dared to allege certain false and malicious charges, hath been suddenly removed from among

us, it is apparent that the question for this time falls. But forasmuch as you further allege that the Apostle and Evangelist St John in his heavenly Apocalypse describes the Holy Roman Church under the guise and symbol of the Scarlet Woman, be it known to you,' *etc*.

Search as he might, Anderson could find no sequel to this letter nor any clue to the cause or manner of the 'removal' of the *casus belli*. He could only suppose that Francken had died suddenly; and as there were only two days between the date of Nielsen's last letter— when Francken was evidently still in being— and that of the Bishop's letter, the death must have been completely unexpected.

In the afternoon he paid a short visit to Hald, and took his tea at Baekkelund; nor could he notice, though he was in a somewhat nervous frame of mind, that there was any indication of such a failure of eye or brain as his experiences of the morning had led him to fear.

At supper he found himself next to the landlord.

'What,' he asked him, after some indifferent conversation, 'is the reason why in most of the hotels one visits in this country the number thirteen is left out of the list of rooms? I see you have none here.'

The landlord seemed amused.

'To think that you should have noticed a thing like that! I've thought about it once or twice myself, to tell the truth. An educated man, I've said, has no business with these superstitious notions. I was brought up myself here in the high school of Viborg, and our old master was always a man to set his face against anything of that kind. He's been dead now this many years— a fine upstanding man he was, and ready with his hands as well as his head. I recollect us boys, one snowy day— '

Here he plunged into reminiscence.

'Then you don't think there is any particular objection to having a Number 13?' said Anderson.

'Ah! to be sure. Well, you understand, I was brought up to the business by my poor old father. He kept an hotel in Aarhuus first, and then, when we were born, he moved to Viborg here, which was his native place, and had the Phoenix here until he died. That was in 1876. Then I started business in

Silkeborg, and only the year before last I moved into this house.'

Then followed more details as to the state of the house and business when first taken over.

'And when you came here, was there a Number 13?'

'No, no. I was going to tell you about that. You see, in a place like this, the commercial class— the travellers— are what we have to provide for in general. And put them in Number 13? Why, they'd as soon sleep in the street, or sooner. As far as I'm concerned myself, it wouldn't make a penny difference to me what the number of my room was, and so I've often said to them; but they stick to it that it brings them bad luck. Quantities of stories they have among them of men that have slept in a Number 13 and never been the same again, or lost their best customers, or— one thing and another,' said the landlord, after searching for a more graphic phrase.

'Then what do you use your Number 13 for?' said Anderson, conscious as he said the words of a curious anxiety quite disproportionate to the importance of the question.

'My Number 13? Why, don't I tell you that there isn't such a thing in the house? I thought you might have noticed that. If there was it would be next door to your own room.'

'Well, yes; only I happened to think— that is, I fancied last night that I had seen a door numbered thirteen in that passage; and, really, I am almost certain I must have been right, for I saw it the night before as well.'

Of course, Herr Kristensen laughed this notion to scorn, as Anderson had expected, and emphasized with much iteration the fact that no Number 13 existed or had existed before him in that hotel.

Anderson was in some ways relieved by his certainty, but still puzzled, and he began to think that the best way to make sure whether he had indeed been subject to an illusion or not was to invite the landlord to his room to smoke a cigar later on in the evening. Some photographs of English towns which he had with him formed a sufficiently good excuse.

Herr Kristensen was flattered by the invitation, and most willingly accepted it. At about ten o'clock he was to make his appearance, but before that Anderson had some letters to write, and retired for the purpose of writing them. He almost

blushed to himself at confessing it, but he could not deny that it was the fact that he was becoming quite nervous about the question of the existence of Number 13; so much so that he approached his room by way of Number 11, in order that he might not be obliged to pass the door, or the place where the door ought to be. He looked quickly and suspiciously about the room when he entered it, but there was nothing, beyond that indefinable air of being smaller than usual, to warrant any misgivings. There was no question of the presence or absence of his portmanteau tonight. He had himself emptied it of its contents and lodged it under his bed. With a certain effort he dismissed the thought of Number 13 from his mind, and sat down to his writing.

His neighbours were quiet enough. Occasionally a door opened in the passage and a pair of boots was thrown out, or a bagman walked past humming to himself, and outside, from time to time, a cart thundered over the atrocious cobblestones, or a quick step hurried along the flags.

Anderson finished his letters, ordered in whisky and soda, and then went to the window and studied the dead wall opposite and the shadows upon it.

As far as he could remember, Number 14 had been occupied by the lawyer, a staid man, who said little at meals, being generally engaged in studying a small bundle of papers beside his plate. Apparently, however, he was in the habit of giving vent to his animal spirits when alone. Why else should he be dancing? The shadow from the next room evidently showed that he was. Again and again his thin form crossed the window, his arms waved, and a gaunt leg was kicked up with surprising agility. He seemed to be barefooted, and the floor must be well laid, for no sound betrayed his movements. Sagförer Herr Anders Jensen, dancing at ten o’clock at night in a hotel bedroom, seemed a fitting subject for a historical painting in the grand style; and Anderson’s thoughts, like those of Emily in the ‘Mysteries of Udolpho’, began to ’arrange themselves in the following lines’:

When I return to my hotel,
At ten o’clock p.m.,
The waiters think I am unwell;

I do not care for them.
But when I've locked my chamber door,
And put my boots outside,
I dance all night upon the floor.
And even if my neighbours swore,
I'd go on dancing all the more,
For I'm acquainted with the law,
And in despite of all their jaw,
Their protests I deride.

Had not the landlord at this moment knocked at the door, it is probable that quite a long poem might have been laid before the reader. To judge from his look of surprise when he found himself in the room, Herr Kristensen was struck, as Anderson had been, by something unusual in its aspect. But he made no remark. Anderson's photographs interested him mightily, and formed the text of many autobiographical discourses. Nor is it quite clear how the conversation could have been diverted into the desired channel of Number 13, had not the lawyer at this moment begun to sing, and to sing in a manner which could leave no doubt in anyone's mind that he was either exceedingly drunk or raving mad. It was a high, thin voice that they heard, and it seemed dry, as if from long disuse. Of words or tune there was no question. It went sailing up to a surprising height, and was carried down with a despairing moan as of a winter wind in a hollow chimney, or an organ whose wind fails suddenly. It was a really horrible sound, and Anderson felt that if he had been alone he must have fled for refuge and society to some neighbour bagman's room.

The landlord sat open-mouthed.

'I don't understand it,' he said at last, wiping his forehead. 'It is dreadful. I have heard it once before, but I made sure it was a cat.'

'Is he mad?' said Anderson.

'He must be; and what a sad thing! Such a good customer, too, and so successful in his business, by what I hear, and a young family to bring up.'

Just then came an impatient knock at the door, and the knocker entered, without waiting to be asked. It was the

lawyer, in *déshabille* and very rough-haired; and very angry he looked.

‘I beg pardon, sir,’ he said, ’but I should be much obliged if you would kindly desist— ’

Here he stopped, for it was evident that neither of the persons before him was responsible for the disturbance; and after a moment’s lull it swelled forth again more wildly than before.

‘But what in the name of Heaven does it mean?’ broke out the lawyer. ‘Where is it? Who is it? Am I going out of my mind?’

’Surely, Herr Jensen, it comes from your room next door? Isn’t there a cat or something stuck in the chimney?’

This was the best that occurred to Anderson to say and he realized its futility as he spoke; but anything was better than to stand and listen to that horrible voice, and look at the broad, white face of the landlord, all perspiring and quivering as he clutched the arms of his chair.

‘Impossible,’ said the lawyer, ’impossible. There is no chimney. I came here because I was convinced the noise was going on here. It was certainly in the next room to mine.’

‘Was there no door between yours and mine?’ said Anderson eagerly.

‘No, sir,’ said Herr Jensen, rather sharply. ’At least, not this morning.’

‘Ah!’ said Anderson. ‘Nor tonight?’

‘I am not sure,’ said the lawyer with some hesitation.

Suddenly the crying or singing voice in the next room died away, and the singer was heard seemingly to laugh to himself in a crooning manner. The three men actually shivered at the sound. Then there was a silence.

‘Come,’ said the lawyer, ’what have you to say, Herr Kristensen? What does this mean?’

‘Good Heaven!’ said Kristensen. ’How should I tell! I know no more than you, gentlemen. I pray I may never hear such a noise again.’

‘So do I,’ said Herr Jensen, and he added something under his breath. Anderson thought it sounded like the last words of the Psalter, ’*omnis spiritus laudet Dominum*,’ but he could not be sure.

‘But we must do something,’ said Anderson— ’the three of us. Shall we go and investigate in the next room?’

‘But that is Herr Jensen’s room,’ wailed the landlord. ’It is no use; he has come from there himself.’

‘I am not so sure,’ said Jensen. ’I think this gentleman is right: we must go and see.’

The only weapons of defence that could be mustered on the spot were a stick and umbrella. The expedition went out into the passage, not without quakings. There was a deadly quiet outside, but a light shone from under the next door. Anderson and Jensen approached it. The latter turned the handle, and gave a sudden vigorous push. No use. The door stood fast.

‘Herr Kristensen,’ said Jensen, ’will you go and fetch the strongest servant you have in the place? We must see this through.’

The landlord nodded, and hurried off, glad to be away from the scene of action. Jensen and Anderson remained outside looking at the door.

‘It *is* Number 13, you see,’ said the latter.

‘Yes; there is your door, and there is mine,’ said Jensen.

‘My room has three windows in the daytime,’ said Anderson with difficulty, suppressing a nervous laugh.

‘By George, so has mine!’ said the lawyer, turning and looking at Anderson. His back was now to the door. In that moment the door opened, and an arm came out and clawed at his shoulder. It was clad in ragged, yellowish linen, and the bare skin, where it could be seen, had long grey hair upon it.

Anderson was just in time to pull Jensen out of its reach with a cry of disgust and fright, when the door shut again, and a low laugh was heard.

Jensen had seen nothing, but when Anderson hurriedly told him what a risk he had run, he fell into a great state of agitation, and suggested that they should retire from the enterprise and lock themselves up in one or other of their rooms.

However, while he was developing this plan, the landlord and two able-bodied men arrived on the scene, all looking rather serious and alarmed. Jensen met them with a torrent of description and explanation, which did not at all tend to encourage them for the fray.

The men dropped the crowbars they had brought, and said flatly that they were not going to risk their throats in that devil’s den. The landlord was miserably nervous and undecided,

conscious that if the danger were not faced his hotel was ruined, and very loth to face it himself. Luckily Anderson hit upon a way of rallying the demoralized force.

'Is this,' he said, 'the Danish courage I have heard so much of? It isn't a German in there, and if it was, we are five to one.'

The two servants and Jensen were stung into action by this, and made a dash at the door.

'Stop!' said Anderson. 'Don't lose your heads. You stay out here with the light, landlord, and one of you two men break in the door, and don't go in when it gives way.'

The men nodded, and the younger stepped forward, raised his crowbar, and dealt a tremendous blow on the upper panel. The result was not in the least what any of them anticipated. There was no cracking or rending of wood— only a dull sound, as if the solid wall had been struck. The man dropped his tool with a shout, and began rubbing his elbow. His cry drew their eyes upon him for a moment; then Anderson looked at the door again. It was gone; the plaster wall of the passage stared him in the face, with a considerable gash in it where the crowbar had struck it. Number 13 had passed out of existence.

For a brief space they stood perfectly still, gazing at the blank wall. An early cock in the yard beneath was heard to crow; and as Anderson glanced in the direction of the sound, he saw through the window at the end of the long passage that the eastern sky was paling to the dawn.

'Perhaps,' said the landlord, with hesitation, 'you gentlemen would like another room for tonight— a double-bedded one?'

Neither Jensen nor Anderson was averse to the suggestion. They felt inclined to hunt in couples after their late experience. It was found convenient, when each of them went to his room to collect the articles he wanted for the night, that the other should go with him and hold the candle. They noticed that both Number 12 and Number 14 had *three* windows.

* * * * *

Next morning the same party reassembled in Number 12. The landlord was naturally anxious to avoid engaging outside help, and yet it was imperative that the mystery attaching to that part of the house should be cleared up. Accordingly the two servants had been induced to take upon them the function of carpenters. The furniture was cleared away, and, at the cost

of a good many irretrievably damaged planks, that portion of the floor was taken up which lay nearest to Number 14.

You will naturally suppose that a skeleton— say that of Mag Nicolas Francken— was discovered. That was not so. What they did find lying between the beams which supported the flooring was a small copper box. In it was a neatly-folded vellum document, with about twenty lines of writing. Both Anderson and Jensen (who proved to be something of a palaeographer) were much excited by this discovery, which promised to afford the key to these extraordinary phenomena.

* * * * *

I possess a copy of an astrological work which I have never read. It has, by way of frontispiece, a woodcut by Hans Sebald Beham, representing a number of sages seated round a table. This detail may enable connoisseurs to identify the book. I cannot myself recollect its title, and it is not at this moment within reach; but the fly-leaves of it are covered with writing, and, during the ten years in which I have owned the volume, I have not been able to determine which way up this writing ought to be read, much less in what language it is. Not dissimilar was the position of Anderson and Jensen after the protracted examination to which they submitted the document in the copper box.

After two days' contemplation of it, Jensen, who was the bolder spirit of the two, hazarded the conjecture that the language was either Latin or Old Danish.

Anderson ventured upon no surmises, and was very willing to surrender the box and the parchment to the Historical Society of Viborg to be placed in their museum.

I had the whole story from him a few months later, as we sat in a wood near Upsala, after a visit to the library there, where we— or, rather, I— had laughed over the contract by which Daniel Salthenius (in later life Professor of Hebrew at Königsberg) sold himself to Satan. Anderson was not really amused.

'Young idiot!' he said, meaning Salthenius, who was only an undergraduate when he committed that indiscretion, 'how did he know what company he was courting?'

And when I suggested the usual considerations he only grunted. That same afternoon he told me what you have read;

but he refused to draw any inferences from it, and to assent to any that I drew for him.

COUNT MAGNUS

By what means the papers out of which I have made a connected story came into my hands is the last point which the reader will learn from these pages. But it is necessary to prefix to my extracts from them a statement of the form in which I possess them.

They consist, then, partly of a series of collections for a book of travels, such a volume as was a common product of the forties and fifties. Horace Marryat's *Journal of a Residence in Jutland and the Danish Isles* is a fair specimen of the class to which I allude. These books usually treated of some unknown district on the Continent. They were illustrated with woodcuts or steel plates. They gave details of hotel accommodation and of means of communication, such as we now expect to find in any well-regulated guide-book, and they dealt largely in reported conversations with intelligent foreigners, racy innkeepers, and garrulous peasants. In a word, they were chatty.

Begun with the idea of furnishing material for such a book, my papers as they progressed assumed the character of a record of one single personal experience, and this record was continued up to the very eve, almost, of its termination.

The writer was a Mr Wraxall. For my knowledge of him I have to depend entirely on the evidence his writings afford, and from these I deduce that he was a man past middle age, possessed of some private means, and very much alone in the world. He had, it seems, no settled abode in England, but was a denizen of hotels and boarding-houses. It is probable that he entertained the idea of settling down at some future time which never came; and I think it also likely that the Pantechnicon fire in the early seventies must have destroyed a great deal that would have thrown light on his antecedents, for he refers once or twice to property of his that was warehoused at that establishment.

It is further apparent that Mr Wraxall had published a book, and that it treated of a holiday he had once taken in Brittany. More than this I cannot say about his work, because a diligent search in bibliographical works has convinced me that it must have appeared either anonymously or under a pseudonym.

As to his character, it is not difficult to form some superficial opinion. He must have been an intelligent and cultivated man. It seems that he was near being a Fellow of his college at Oxford— Brasenose, as I judge from the Calendar. His besetting fault was pretty clearly that of over-inquisitiveness, possibly a good fault in a traveller, certainly a fault for which this traveller paid dearly enough in the end.

On what proved to be his last expedition, he was plotting another book. Scandinavia, a region not widely known to Englishmen forty years ago, had struck him as an interesting field. He must have alighted on some old books of Swedish history or memoirs, and the idea had struck him that there was room for a book descriptive of travel in Sweden, interspersed with episodes from the history of some of the great Swedish families. He procured letters of introduction, therefore, to some persons of quality in Sweden, and set out thither in the early summer of 1863.

Of his travels in the North there is no need to speak, nor of his residence of some weeks in Stockholm. I need only mention that some *savant* resident there put him on the track of an important collection of family papers belonging to the proprietors of an ancient manor-house in Vestergothland, and obtained for him permission to examine them.

The manor-house, or *herrgard*, in question is to be called Råbäck (pronounced something like Roebeck), though that is not its name. It is one of the best buildings of its kind in all the country, and the picture of it in Dahlenberg's *Suecia antiqua et moderna*, engraved in 1694, shows it very much as the tourist may see it today. It was built soon after 1600, and is, roughly speaking, very much like an English house of that period in respect of material— red-brick with stone facings— and style. The man who built it was a scion of the great house of De la Gardie, and his descendants possess it still. De la Gardie is the name by which I will designate them when mention of them becomes necessary.

They received Mr Wraxall with great kindness and courtesy, and pressed him to stay in the house as long as his researches lasted. But, preferring to be independent, and mistrusting his powers of conversing in Swedish, he settled himself at the village inn, which turned out quite sufficiently comfortable, at

any rate during the summer months. This arrangement would entail a short walk daily to and from the manor-house of something under a mile. The house itself stood in a park, and was protected— we should say grown up— with large old timber. Near it you found the walled garden, and then entered a close wood fringing one of the small lakes with which the whole country is pitted. Then came the wall of the demesne, and you climbed a steep knoll— a knob of rock lightly covered with soil— and on the top of this stood the church, fenced in with tall dark trees. It was a curious building to English eyes. The nave and aisles were low, and filled with pews and galleries. In the western gallery stood the handsome old organ, gaily painted, and with silver pipes. The ceiling was flat, and had been adorned by a seventeenth-century artist with a strange and hideous ‘Last Judgement’, full of lurid flames, falling cities, burning ships, crying souls, and brown and smiling demons. Handsome brass coronae hung from the roof; the pulpit was like a doll’s-house covered with little painted wooden cherubs and saints; a stand with three hour-glasses was hinged to the preacher’s desk. Such sights as these may be seen in many a church in Sweden now, but what distinguished this one was an addition to the original building. At the eastern end of the north aisle the builder of the manor-house had erected a mausoleum for himself and his family. It was a largish eight-sided building, lighted by a series of oval windows, and it had a domed roof, topped by a kind of pumpkin-shaped object rising into a spire, a form in which Swedish architects greatly delighted. The roof was of copper externally, and was painted black, while the walls, in common with those of the church, were staringly white. To this mausoleum there was no access from the church. It had a portal and steps of its own on the northern side.

Past the churchyard the path to the village goes, and not more than three or four minutes bring you to the inn door.

On the first day of his stay at Råbäck Mr Wraxall found the church door open, and made these notes of the interior which I have epitomized. Into the mausoleum, however, he could not make his way. He could by looking through the keyhole just descry that there were fine marble effigies and sarcophagi of

copper, and a wealth of armorial ornament, which made him very anxious to spend some time in investigation.

The papers he had come to examine at the manor-house proved to be of just the kind he wanted for his book. There were family correspondence, journals, and account-books of the earliest owners of the estate, very carefully kept and clearly written, full of amusing and picturesque detail. The first De la Gardie appeared in them as a strong and capable man. Shortly after the building of the mansion there had been a period of distress in the district, and the peasants had risen and attacked several châteaux and done some damage. The owner of Råbäck took a leading part in supressing trouble, and there was reference to executions of ring-leaders and severe punishments inflicted with no sparing hand.

The portrait of this Magnus de la Gardie was one of the best in the house, and Mr Wraxall studied it with no little interest after his day's work. He gives no detailed description of it, but I gather that the face impressed him rather by its power than by its beauty or goodness; in fact, he writes that Count Magnus was an almost phenomenally ugly man.

On this day Mr Wraxall took his supper with the family, and walked back in the late but still bright evening.

'I must remember,' he writes, 'to ask the sexton if he can let me into the mausoleum at the church. He evidently has access to it himself, for I saw him tonight standing on the steps, and, as I thought, locking or unlocking the door.'

I find that early on the following day Mr Wraxall had some conversation with his landlord. His setting it down at such length as he does surprised me at first; but I soon realized that the papers I was reading were, at least in their beginning, the materials for the book he was meditating, and that it was to have been one of those quasi-journalistic productions which admit of the introduction of an admixture of conversational matter.

His object, he says, was to find out whether any traditions of Count Magnus de la Gardie lingered on in the scenes of that gentleman's activity, and whether the popular estimate of him were favourable or not. He found that the Count was decidedly not a favourite. If his tenants came late to their work on the days which they owed to him as Lord of the Manor, they were

set on the wooden horse, or flogged and branded in the manor-house yard. One or two cases there were of men who had occupied lands which encroached on the lord's domain, and whose houses had been mysteriously burnt on a winter's night, with the whole family inside. But what seemed to dwell on the innkeeper's mind most— for he returned to the subject more than once— was that the Count had been on the Black Pilgrimage, and had brought something or someone back with him.

You will naturally inquire, as Mr Wraxall did, what the Black Pilgrimage may have been. But your curiosity on the point must remain unsatisfied for the time being, just as his did. The landlord was evidently unwilling to give a full answer, or indeed any answer, on the point, and, being called out for a moment, trotted out with obvious alacrity, only putting his head in at the door a few minutes afterwards to say that he was called away to Skara, and should not be back till evening.

So Mr Wraxall had to go unsatisfied to his day's work at the manor-house. The papers on which he was just then engaged soon put his thoughts into another channel, for he had to occupy himself with glancing over the correspondence between Sophia Albertina in Stockholm and her married cousin Ulrica Leonora at Råbäck in the years 1705-10. The letters were of exceptional interest from the light they threw upon the culture of that period in Sweden, as anyone can testify who has read the full edition of them in the publications of the Swedish Historical Manuscripts Commission.

In the afternoon he had done with these, and after returning the boxes in which they were kept to their places on the shelf, he proceeded, very naturally, to take down some of the volumes nearest to them, in order to determine which of them had best be his principal subject of investigation next day. The shelf he had hit upon was occupied mostly by a collection of account-books in the writing of the first Count Magnus. But one among them was not an account-book, but a book of alchemical and other tracts in another sixteenth-century hand. Not being very familiar with alchemical literature, Mr Wraxall spends much space which he might have spared in setting out the names and beginnings of the various treatises: The book of the Phoenix, book of the Thirty Words, book of the Toad, book of Miriam, Turba philosophorum, and so forth; and then he

announces with a good deal of circumstance his delight at finding, on a leaf originally left blank near the middle of the book, some writing of Count Magnus himself headed ‘Liber nigrae peregrinationis’. It is true that only a few lines were written, but there was quite enough to show that the landlord had that morning been referring to a belief at least as old as the time of Count Magnus, and probably shared by him. This is the English of what was written:

’If any man desires to obtain a long life, if he would obtain a faithful messenger and see the blood of his enemies, it is necessary that he should first go into the city of Chorazin, and there salute the prince… .’ Here there was an erasure of one word, not very thoroughly done, so that Mr Wraxall felt pretty sure that he was right in reading it as *aeris* (’of the air’). But there was no more of the text copied, only a line in Latin: *Quaere reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora*. (See the rest of this matter among the more private things.)

It could not be denied that this threw a rather lurid light upon the tastes and beliefs of the Count; but to Mr Wraxall, separated from him by nearly three centuries, the thought that he might have added to his general forcefulness alchemy, and to alchemy something like magic, only made him a more picturesque figure, and when, after a rather prolonged contemplation of his picture in the hall, Mr Wraxall set out on his homeward way, his mind was full of the thought of Count Magnus. He had no eyes for his surroundings, no perception of the evening scents of the woods or the evening light on the lake; and when all of a sudden he pulled up short, he was astonished to find himself already at the gate of the churchyard, and within a few minutes of his dinner. His eyes fell on the mausoleum.

‘Ah,’ he said, ’Count Magnus, there you are. I should dearly like to see you.’

‘Like many solitary men,’ he writes, ’I have a habit of talking to myself aloud; and, unlike some of the Greek and Latin particles, I do not expect an answer. Certainly, and perhaps fortunately in this case, there was neither voice nor any that regarded: only the woman who, I suppose, was cleaning up the church, dropped some metallic object on the floor, whose clang startled me. Count Magnus, I think, sleeps sound enough.’

That same evening the landlord of the inn, who had heard Mr Wraxall say that he wished to see the clerk or deacon (as he would be called in Sweden) of the parish, introduced him to that official in the inn parlour. A visit to the De la Gardie tomb-house was soon arranged for the next day, and a little general conversation ensued.

Mr Wraxall, remembering that one function of Scandinavian deacons is to teach candidates for Confirmation, thought he would refresh his own memory on a Biblical point.

‘Can you tell me,’ he said, ‘anything about Chorazin?’

The deacon seemed startled, but readily reminded him how that village had once been denounced.

‘To be sure,’ said Mr Wraxall; ‘it is, I suppose, quite a ruin now?’

‘So I expect,’ replied the deacon. ’I have heard some of our old priests say that Antichrist is to be born there; and there are tales— ’

‘Ah! what tales are those?’ Mr Wraxall put in.

‘Tales, I was going to say, which I have forgotten,’ said the deacon; and soon after that he said good night.

The landlord was now alone, and at Mr Wraxall’s mercy; and that inquirer was not inclined to spare him.

‘Herr Nielsen,’ he said, ’I have found out something about the Black Pilgrimage. You may as well tell me what you know. What did the Count bring back with him?’

Swedes are habitually slow, perhaps, in answering, or perhaps the landlord was an exception. I am not sure; but Mr Wraxall notes that the landlord spent at least one minute in looking at him before he said anything at all. Then he came close up to his guest, and with a good deal of effort he spoke:

’Mr Wraxall, I can tell you this one little tale, and no more— not any more. You must not ask anything when I have done. In my grandfather’s time— that is, ninety-two years ago— there were two men who said: “The Count is dead; we do not care for him. We will go tonight and have a free hunt in his wood”— the long wood on the hill that you have seen behind Råbäck. Well, those that heard them say this, they said: “No, do not go; we are sure you will meet with persons walking who should not be walking. They should be resting, not walking.” These men laughed. There were no forestmen to keep the wood, because

no one wished to live there. The family were not here at the house. These men could do what they wished.

’Very well, they go to the wood that night. My grandfather was sitting here in this room. It was the summer, and a light night. With the window open, he could see out to the wood, and hear.

’So he sat there, and two or three men with him, and they listened. At first they hear nothing at all; then they hear someone— you know how far away it is— they hear someone scream, just as if the most inside part of his soul was twisted out of him. All of them in the room caught hold of each other, and they sat so for three-quarters of an hour. Then they hear someone else, only about three hundred ells off. They hear him laugh out loud: it was not one of those two men that laughed, and, indeed, they have all of them said that it was not any man at all. After that they hear a great door shut.

’Then, when it was just light with the sun, they all went to the priest. They said to him:

’"Father, put on your gown and your ruff, and come to bury these men, Anders Bjornsen and Hans Thorbjorn.”

’You understand that they were sure these men were dead. So they went to the wood— my grandfather never forgot this. He said they were all like so many dead men themselves. The priest, too, he was in a white fear. He said when they came to him:

’"I heard one cry in the night, and I heard one laugh afterwards. If I cannot forget that, I shall not be able to sleep again.”

’So they went to the wood, and they found these men on the edge of the wood. Hans Thorbjorn was standing with his back against a tree, and all the time he was pushing with his hands— pushing something away from him which was not there. So he was not dead. And they led him away, and took him to the house at Nykjoping, and he died before the winter; but he went on pushing with his hands. Also Anders Bjornsen was there; but he was dead. And I tell you this about Anders Bjornsen, that he was once a beautiful man, but now his face was not there, because the flesh of it was sucked away off the bones. You understand that? My grandfather did not forget that. And they laid him on the bier which they brought, and

they put a cloth over his head, and the priest walked before; and they began to sing the psalm for the dead as well as they could. So, as they were singing the end of the first verse, one fell down, who was carrying the head of the bier, and the others looked back, and they saw that the cloth had fallen off, and the eyes of Anders Bjornsen were looking up, because there was nothing to close over them. And this they could not bear. Therefore the priest laid the cloth upon him, and sent for a spade, and they buried him in that place.'

The next day Mr Wraxall records that the deacon called for him soon after his breakfast, and took him to the church and mausoleum. He noticed that the key of the latter was hung on a nail just by the pulpit, and it occurred to him that, as the church door seemed to be left unlocked as a rule, it would not be difficult for him to pay a second and more private visit to the monuments if there proved to be more of interest among them than could be digested at first. The building, when he entered it, he found not unimposing. The monuments, mostly large erections of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were dignified if luxuriant, and the epitaphs and heraldry were copious. The central space of the domed room was occupied by three copper sarcophagi, covered with finely-engraved ornament. Two of them had, as is commonly the case in Denmark and Sweden, a large metal crucifix on the lid. The third, that of Count Magnus, as it appeared, had, instead of that, a full-length effigy engraved upon it, and round the edge were several bands of similar ornament representing various scenes. One was a battle, with cannon belching out smoke, and walled towns, and troops of pikemen. Another showed an execution. In a third, among trees, was a man running at full speed, with flying hair and outstretched hands. After him followed a strange form; it would be hard to say whether the artist had intended it for a man, and was unable to give the requisite similitude, or whether it was intentionally made as monstrous as it looked. In view of the skill with which the rest of the drawing was done, Mr Wraxall felt inclined to adopt the latter idea. The figure was unduly short, and was for the most part muffled in a hooded garment which swept the ground. The only part of the form which projected from that shelter was not shaped like any hand or arm. Mr Wraxall compares it to the tentacle of a devil-

fish, and continues: ’On seeing this, I said to myself, “This, then, which is evidently an allegorical representation of some kind— a fiend pursuing a hunted soul— may be the origin of the story of Count Magnus and his mysterious companion. Let us see how the huntsman is pictured: doubtless it will be a demon blowing his horn.’” But, as it turned out, there was no such sensational figure, only the semblance of a cloaked man on a hillock, who stood leaning on a stick, and watching the hunt with an interest which the engraver had tried to express in his attitude.

Mr Wraxall noted the finely-worked and massive steel padlocks— three in number— which secured the sarcophagus. One of them, he saw, was detached, and lay on the pavement. And then, unwilling to delay the deacon longer or to waste his own working-time, he made his way onward to the manor-house.

‘It is curious,’ he notes, ’how, on retracing a familiar path, one’s thoughts engross one to the absolute exclusion of surrounding objects. Tonight, for the second time, I had entirely failed to notice where I was going (I had planned a private visit to the tomb-house to copy the epitaphs), when I suddenly, as it were, awoke to consciousness, and found myself (as before) turning in at the churchyard gate, and, I believe, singing or chanting some such words as, “Are you awake, Count Magnus? Are you asleep, Count Magnus?” and then something more which I have failed to recollect. It seemed to me that I must have been behaving in this nonsensical way for some time.’

He found the key of the mausoleum where he had expected to find it, and copied the greater part of what he wanted; in fact, he stayed until the light began to fail him.

‘I must have been wrong,’ he writes, ’in saying that one of the padlocks of my Counts sarcophagus was unfastened; I see tonight that two are loose. I picked both up, and laid them carefully on the window-ledge, after trying unsuccessfully to close them. The remaining one is still firm, and, though I take it to be a spring lock, I cannot guess how it is opened. Had I succeeded in undoing it, I am almost afraid I should have taken the liberty of opening the sarcophagus. It is strange, the interest I feel in the personality of this, I fear, somewhat ferocious and grim old noble.’

The day following was, as it turned out, the last of Mr Wraxall's stay at Råbäck. He received letters connected with certain investments which made it desirable that he should return to England; his work among the papers was practically done, and travelling was slow. He decided, therefore, to make his farewells, put some finishing touches to his notes, and be off.

These finishing touches and farewells, as it turned out, took more time than he had expected. The hospitable family insisted on his staying to dine with them— they dined at three— and it was verging on half past six before he was outside the iron gates of Råbäck. He dwelt on every step of his walk by the lake, determined to saturate himself, now that he trod it for the last time, in the sentiment of the place and hour. And when he reached the summit of the churchyard knoll, he lingered for many minutes, gazing at the limitless prospect of woods near and distant, all dark beneath a sky of liquid green. When at last he turned to go, the thought struck him that surely he must bid farewell to Count Magnus as well as the rest of the De la Gardies. The church was but twenty yards away, and he knew where the key of the mausoleum hung. It was not long before he was standing over the great copper coffin, and, as usual, talking to himself aloud: 'You may have been a bit of a rascal in your time, Magnus,' he was saying, 'but for all that I should like to see you, or, rather— '

'Just at that instant,' he says, 'I felt a blow on my foot. Hastily enough I drew it back, and something fell on the pavement with a clash. It was the third, the last of the three padlocks which had fastened the sarcophagus. I stooped to pick it up, and— Heaven is my witness that I am writing only the bare truth— before I had raised myself there was a sound of metal hinges creaking, and I distinctly saw the lid shifting upwards. I may have behaved like a coward, but I could not for my life stay for one moment. I was outside that dreadful building in less time than I can write— almost as quickly as I could have said— the words; and what frightens me yet more, I could not turn the key in the lock. As I sit here in my room noting these facts, I ask myself (it was not twenty minutes ago) whether that noise of creaking metal continued, and I cannot tell whether it did or not. I only know that there was something more than I have written that alarmed me, but whether it was sound

or sight I am not able to remember. What is this that I have done?’

* * * * *

Poor Mr Wraxall! He set out on his journey to England on the next day, as he had planned, and he reached England in safety; and yet, as I gather from his changed hand and inconsequent jottings, a broken man. One of the several small note-books that have come to me with his papers gives, not a key to, but a kind of inkling of, his experiences. Much of his journey was made by canal-boat, and I find not less than six painful attempts to enumerate and describe his fellow-passengers. The entries are of this kind:

24. Pastor of village in Skane. Usual black coat and soft black hat.

25. Commercial traveller from Stockholm going to Trollhättan. Black cloak, brown hat.

26. Man in long black cloak, broad-leafed hat, very old-fashioned.

This entry is lined out, and a note added: ’Perhaps identical with No. 13. Have not yet seen his face.’ On referring to No. 13, I find that he is a Roman priest in a cassock.

The net result of the reckoning is always the same. Twenty-eight people appear in the enumeration, one being always a man in a long black cloak and broad hat, and another a ‘short figure in dark cloak and hood’. On the other hand, it is always noted that only twenty-six passengers appear at meals, and that the man in the cloak is perhaps absent, and the short figure is certainly absent.

On reaching England, it appears that Mr Wraxall landed at Harwich, and that he resolved at once to put himself out of the reach of some person or persons whom he never specifies, but whom he had evidently come to regard as his pursuers. Accordingly he took a vehicle— it was a closed fly— not trusting the railway and drove across country to the village of Belchamp St Paul. It was about nine o’clock on a moonlight August night when he neared the place. He was sitting forward, and looking out of the window at the fields and thickets— there was little else to be seen— racing past him. Suddenly he came to a cross-road. At the corner two figures were standing motionless; both were in dark cloaks; the taller one

wore a hat, the shorter a hood. He had no time to see their faces, nor did they make any motion that he could discern. Yet the horse shied violently and broke into a gallop, and Mr Wraxall sank back into his seat in something like desperation. He had seen them before.

Arrived at Belchamp St Paul, he was fortunate enough to find a decent furnished lodging, and for the next twenty-four hours he lived, comparatively speaking, in peace. His last notes were written on this day. They are too disjointed and ejaculatory to be given here in full, but the substance of them is clear enough. He is expecting a visit from his pursuers— how or when he knows not— and his constant cry is 'What has he done?' and 'Is there no hope?' Doctors, he knows, would call him mad, policemen would laugh at him. The parson is away. What can he do but lock his door and cry to God?

People still remember last year at Belchamp St Paul how a strange gentleman came one evening in August years back; and how the next morning but one he was found dead, and there was an inquest; and the jury that viewed the body fainted, seven of 'em did, and none of 'em wouldn't speak to what they see, and the verdict was visitation of God; and how the people as kep' the 'ouse moved out that same week, and went away from that part. But they do not, I think, know that any glimmer of light has ever been thrown, or could be thrown, on the mystery. It so happened that last year the little house came into my hands as part of a legacy. It had stood empty since 1863, and there seemed no prospect of letting it; so I had it pulled down, and the papers of which I have given you an abstract were found in a forgotten cupboard under the window in the best bedroom.

‘OH, WHISTLE, AND I’LL COME TO YOU, MY LAD’

’I suppose you will be getting away pretty soon, now Full Term is over, Professor,’ said a person not in the story to the Professor of Ontography, soon after they had sat down next to each other at a feast in the hospitable hall of St James’s College.

The Professor was young, neat, and precise in speech.

‘Yes,’ he said; ’my friends have been making me take up golf this term, and I mean to go to the East Coast— in point of fact to Burnstow— (I dare say you know it) for a week or ten days, to improve my game. I hope to get off tomorrow.’

‘Oh, Parkins,’ said his neighbour on the other side, ’if you are going to Burnstow, I wish you would look at the site of the Templars’ preceptory, and let me know if you think it would be any good to have a dig there in the summer.’

It was, as you might suppose, a person of antiquarian pursuits who said this, but, since he merely appears in this prologue, there is no need to give his entitlements.

‘Certainly,’ said Parkins, the Professor: ’if you will describe to me whereabouts the site is, I will do my best to give you an idea of the lie of the land when I get back; or I could write to you about it, if you would tell me where you are likely to be.’

’Don’t trouble to do that, thanks. It’s only that I’m thinking of taking my family in that direction in the Long, and it occurred to me that, as very few of the English preceptories have ever been properly planned, I might have an opportunity of doing something useful on off-days.’

The Professor rather sniffed at the idea that planning out a preceptory could be described as useful. His neighbour continued:

’The site— I doubt if there is anything showing above ground— must be down quite close to the beach now. The sea has encroached tremendously, as you know, all along that bit of coast. I should think, from the map, that it must be about three-quarters of a mile from the Globe Inn, at the north end of the town. Where are you going to stay?’

‘Well, *at* the Globe Inn, as a matter of fact,’ said Parkins; ’I have engaged a room there. I couldn’t get in anywhere else; most of the lodging-houses are shut up in winter, it seems; and,

as it is, they tell me that the only room of any size I can have is really a double-bedded one, and that they haven't a corner in which to store the other bed, and so on. But I must have a fairly large room, for I am taking some books down, and mean to do a bit of work; and though I don't quite fancy having an empty bed— not to speak of two— in what I may call for the time being my study, I suppose I can manage to rough it for the short time I shall be there.'

'Do you call having an extra bed in your room roughing it, Parkins?' said a bluff person opposite. 'Look here, I shall come down and occupy it for a bit; it'll be company for you.'

The Professor quivered, but managed to laugh in a courteous manner.

'By all means, Rogers; there's nothing I should like better. But I'm afraid you would find it rather dull; you don't play golf, do you?'

'No, thank Heaven!' said rude Mr Rogers.

'Well, you see, when I'm not writing I shall most likely be out on the links, and that, as I say, would be rather dull for you, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, I don't know! There's certain to be somebody I know in the place; but, of course, if you don't want me, speak the word, Parkins; I shan't be offended. Truth, as you always tell us, is never offensive.'

Parkins was, indeed, scrupulously polite and strictly truthful. It is to be feared that Mr Rogers sometimes practised upon his knowledge of these characteristics. In Parkins's breast there was a conflict now raging, which for a moment or two did not allow him to answer. That interval being over, he said:

'Well, if you want the exact truth, Rogers, I was considering whether the room I speak of would really be large enough to accommodate us both comfortably; and also whether (mind, I shouldn't have said this if you hadn't pressed me) you would not constitute something in the nature of a hindrance to my work.'

Rogers laughed loudly.

'Well done, Parkins!' he said. 'It's all right. I promise not to interrupt your work; don't you disturb yourself about that. No, I won't come if you don't want me; but I thought I should do so nicely to keep the ghosts off.' Here he might have been seen to

wink and to nudge his next neighbour. Parkins might also have been seen to become pink. 'I beg pardon, Parkins,' Rogers continued; 'I oughtn't to have said that. I forgot you didn't like levity on these topics.'

'Well,' Parkins said, 'as you have mentioned the matter, I freely own that I do *not* like careless talk about what you call ghosts. A man in my position,' he went on, raising his voice a little, 'cannot, I find, be too careful about appearing to sanction the current beliefs on such subjects. As you know, Rogers, or as you ought to know; for I think I have never concealed my views— '

'No, you certainly have not, old man,' put in Rogers *sotto voce*.

'— I hold that any semblance, any appearance of concession to the view that such things might exist is equivalent to a renunciation of all that I hold most sacred. But I'm afraid I have not succeeded in securing your attention.'

'Your *undivided* attention, was what Dr Blimber actually *said*,'[4] Rogers interrupted, with every appearance of an earnest desire for accuracy. 'But I beg your pardon, Parkins: I'm stopping you.'

'No, not at all,' said Parkins. 'I don't remember Blimber; perhaps he was before my time. But I needn't go on. I'm sure you know what I mean.'

'Yes, yes,' said Rogers, rather hastily— 'just so. We'll go into it fully at Burnstow, or somewhere.'

In repeating the above dialogue I have tried to give the impression which it made on me, that Parkins was something of an old woman— rather henlike, perhaps, in his little ways; totally destitute, alas! of the sense of humour, but at the same time dauntless and sincere in his convictions, and a man deserving of the greatest respect. Whether or not the reader has gathered so much, that was the character which Parkins had.

* * * * *

On the following day Parkins did, as he had hoped, succeed in getting away from his college, and in arriving at Burnstow. He was made welcome at the Globe Inn, was safely installed in the large double-bedded room of which we have heard, and was able before retiring to rest to arrange his materials for

4.Mr Rogers was wrong, vide Dombey and Son, chapter xii.

work in apple-pie order upon a commodious table which occupied the outer end of the room, and was surrounded on three sides by windows looking out seaward; that is to say, the central window looked straight out to sea, and those on the left and right commanded prospects along the shore to the north and south respectively. On the south you saw the village of Burnstow. On the north no houses were to be seen, but only the beach and the low cliff backing it. Immediately in front was a strip— not considerable— of rough grass, dotted with old anchors, capstans, and so forth; then a broad path; then the beach. Whatever may have been the original distance between the Globe Inn and the sea, not more than sixty yards now separated them.

The rest of the population of the inn was, of course, a golfing one, and included few elements that call for a special description. The most conspicuous figure was, perhaps, that of an *ancien militaire*, secretary of a London club, and possessed of a voice of incredible strength, and of views of a pronouncedly Protestant type. These were apt to find utterance after his attendance upon the ministrations of the Vicar, an estimable man with inclinations towards a picturesque ritual, which he gallantly kept down as far as he could out of deference to East Anglian tradition.

Professor Parkins, one of whose principal characteristics was pluck, spent the greater part of the day following his arrival at Burnstow in what he had called improving his game, in company with this Colonel Wilson: and during the afternoon— whether the process of improvement were to blame or not, I am not sure— the Colonel's demeanour assumed a colouring so lurid that even Parkins jibbed at the thought of walking home with him from the links. He determined, after a short and furtive look at that bristling moustache and those incarnadined features, that it would be wiser to allow the influences of tea and tobacco to do what they could with the Colonel before the dinner-hour should render a meeting inevitable.

'I might walk home tonight along the beach,' he reflected— 'yes, and take a look— there will be light enough for that— at the ruins of which Disney was talking. I don't exactly know where they are, by the way; but I expect I can hardly help stumbling on them.'

This he accomplished, I may say, in the most literal sense, for in picking his way from the links to the shingle beach his foot caught, partly in a gorse-root and partly in a biggish stone, and over he went. When he got up and surveyed his surroundings, he found himself in a patch of somewhat broken ground covered with small depressions and mounds. These latter, when he came to examine them, proved to be simply masses of flints embedded in mortar and grown over with turf. He must, he quite rightly concluded, be on the site of the preceptory he had promised to look at. It seemed not unlikely to reward the spade of the explorer; enough of the foundations was probably left at no great depth to throw a good deal of light on the general plan. He remembered vaguely that the Templars, to whom this site had belonged, were in the habit of building round churches, and he thought a particular series of the humps or mounds near him did appear to be arranged in something of a circular form. Few people can resist the temptation to try a little amateur research in a department quite outside their own, if only for the satisfaction of showing how successful they would have been had they only taken it up seriously. Our Professor, however, if he felt something of this mean desire, was also truly anxious to oblige Mr Disney. So he paced with care the circular area he had noticed, and wrote down its rough dimensions in his pocket-book. Then he proceeded to examine an oblong eminence which lay east of the centre of the circle, and seemed to his thinking likely to be the base of a platform or altar. At one end of it, the northern, a patch of the turf was gone— removed by some boy or other creature *ferae naturae*. It might, he thought, be as well to probe the soil here for evidences of masonry, and he took out his knife and began scraping away the earth. And now followed another little discovery: a portion of soil fell inward as he scraped, and disclosed a small cavity. He lighted one match after another to help him to see of what nature the hole was, but the wind was too strong for them all. By tapping and scratching the sides with his knife, however, he was able to make out that it must be an artificial hole in masonry. It was rectangular, and the sides, top, and bottom, if not actually plastered, were smooth and regular. Of course it was empty. No! As he withdrew the knife he heard a metallic clink, and when he introduced his hand it met with a

cylindrical object lying on the floor of the hole. Naturally enough, he picked it up, and when he brought it into the light, now fast fading, he could see that it, too, was of man's making— a metal tube about four inches long, and evidently of some considerable age.

By the time Parkins had made sure that there was nothing else in this odd receptacle, it was too late and too dark for him to think of undertaking any further search. What he had done had proved so unexpectedly interesting that he determined to sacrifice a little more of the daylight on the morrow to archaeology. The object which he now had safe in his pocket was bound to be of some slight value at least, he felt sure.

Bleak and solemn was the view on which he took a last look before starting homeward. A faint yellow light in the west showed the links, on which a few figures moving towards the club-house were still visible, the squat martello tower, the lights of Aldsey village, the pale ribbon of sands intersected at intervals by black wooden groynings, the dim and murmuring sea. The wind was bitter from the north, but was at his back when he set out for the Globe. He quickly rattled and clashed through the shingle and gained the sand, upon which, but for the groynings which had to be got over every few yards, the going was both good and quiet. One last look behind, to measure the distance he had made since leaving the ruined Templars' church, showed him a prospect of company on his walk, in the shape of a rather indistinct personage, who seemed to be making great efforts to catch up with him, but made little, if any, progress. I mean that there was an appearance of running about his movements, but that the distance between him and Parkins did not seem materially to lessen. So, at least, Parkins thought, and decided that he almost certainly did not know him, and that it would be absurd to wait until he came up. For all that, company, he began to think, would really be very welcome on that lonely shore, if only you could choose your companion. In his unenlightened days he had read of meetings in such places which even now would hardly bear thinking of. He went on thinking of them, however, until he reached home, and particularly of one which catches most people's fancy at some time of their childhood.' Now I saw in my dream that Christian had gone but a very little way when he saw a foul fiend coming

over the field to meet him.' 'What should I do now,' he thought, 'if I looked back and caught sight of a black figure sharply defined against the yellow sky, and saw that it had horns and wings? I wonder whether I should stand or run for it. Luckily, the gentleman behind is not of that kind, and he seems to be about as far off now as when I saw him first. Well, at this rate, he won't get his dinner as soon as I shall; and, dear me! it's within a quarter of an hour of the time now. I must run!'

Parkins had, in fact, very little time for dressing. When he met the Colonel at dinner, Peace— or as much of her as that gentleman could manage— reigned once more in the military bosom; nor was she put to flight in the hours of bridge that followed dinner, for Parkins was a more than respectable player. When, therefore, he retired towards twelve o'clock, he felt that he had spent his evening in quite a satisfactory way, and that, even for so long as a fortnight or three weeks, life at the Globe would be supportable under similar conditions— 'especially,' thought he, 'if I go on improving my game.'

As he went along the passages he met the boots of the Globe, who stopped and said:

'Beg your pardon, sir, but as I was abrushing your coat just now there was something fell out of the pocket. I put it on your chest of drawers, sir, in your room, sir— a piece of a pipe or somethink of that, sir. Thank you, sir. You'll find it on your chest of drawers, sir— yes, sir. Good night, sir.'

The speech served to remind Parkins of his little discovery of that afternoon. It was with some considerable curiosity that he turned it over by the light of his candles. It was of bronze, he now saw, and was shaped very much after the manner of the modern dog-whistle; in fact it was— yes, certainly it was— actually no more nor less than a whistle. He put it to his lips, but it was quite full of a fine, caked-up sand or earth, which would not yield to knocking, but must be loosened with a knife. Tidy as ever in his habits, Parkins cleared out the earth on to a piece of paper, and took the latter to the window to empty it out. The night was clear and bright, as he saw when he had opened the casement, and he stopped for an instant to look at the sea and note a belated wanderer stationed on the shore in front of the inn. Then he shut the window, a little surprised at the late hours people kept at Burnstow, and took his whistle to

the light again. Why, surely there were marks on it, and not merely marks, but letters! A very little rubbing rendered the deeply-cut inscription quite legible, but the Professor had to confess, after some earnest thought, that the meaning of it was as obscure to him as the writing on the wall to Belshazzar. There were legends both on the front and on the back of the whistle. The one read thus:

FLA
FUR BIS
FLE

The other:

QUIS EST ISTE QUI VENIT

‘I ought to be able to make it out,’ he thought; ’but I suppose I am a little rusty in my Latin. When I come to think of it, I don’t believe I even know the word for a whistle. The long one does seem simple enough. It ought to mean: “Who is this who is coming?” Well, the best way to find out is evidently to whistle for him.’

He blew tentatively and stopped suddenly, startled and yet pleased at the note he had elicited. It had a quality of infinite distance in it, and, soft as it was, he somehow felt it must be audible for miles round. It was a sound, too, that seemed to have the power (which many scents possess) of forming pictures in the brain. He saw quite clearly for a moment a vision of a wide, dark expanse at night, with a fresh wind blowing, and in the midst a lonely figure— how employed, he could not tell. Perhaps he would have seen more had not the picture been broken by the sudden surge of a gust of wind against his casement, so sudden that it made him look up, just in time to see the white glint of a seabird’s wing somewhere outside the dark panes.

The sound of the whistle had so fascinated him that he could not help trying it once more, this time more boldly. The note was little, if at all, louder than before, and repetition broke the illusion— no picture followed, as he had half hoped it might. “But what is this? Goodness! what force the wind can get up in a few minutes! What a tremendous gust! There! I knew that

window-fastening was no use! Ah! I thought so— both candles out. It is enough to tear the room to pieces."

The first thing was to get the window shut. While you might count twenty Parkins was struggling with the small casement, and felt almost as if he were pushing back a sturdy burglar, so strong was the pressure. It slackened all at once, and the window banged to and latched itself. Now to relight the candles and see what damage, if any, had been done. No, nothing seemed amiss; no glass even was broken in the casement. But the noise had evidently roused at least one member of the household: the Colonel was to be heard stumping in his stockinged feet on the floor above, and growling. Quickly as it had risen, the wind did not fall at once. On it went, moaning and rushing past the house, at times rising to a cry so desolate that, as Parkins disinterestedly said, it might have made fanciful people feel quite uncomfortable; even the unimaginative, he thought after a quarter of an hour, might be happier without it.

Whether it was the wind, or the excitement of golf, or of the researches in the preceptory that kept Parkins awake, he was not sure. Awake he remained, in any case, long enough to fancy (as I am afraid I often do myself under such conditions) that he was the victim of all manner of fatal disorders: he would lie counting the beats of his heart, convinced that it was going to stop work every moment, and would entertain grave suspicions of his lungs, brain, liver, *etc*.— suspicions which he was sure would be dispelled by the return of daylight, but which until then refused to be put aside. He found a little vicarious comfort in the idea that someone else was in the same boat. A near neighbour (in the darkness it was not easy to tell his direction) was tossing and rustling in his bed, too.

The next stage was that Parkins shut his eyes and determined to give sleep every chance. Here again over-excitement asserted itself in another form— that of making pictures. *Experto crede*, pictures do come to the closed eyes of one trying to sleep, and are often so little to his taste that he must open his eyes and disperse them.

Parkins's experience on this occasion was a very distressing one. He found that the picture which presented itself to him was continuous. When he opened his eyes, of course, it went; but when he shut them once more it framed itself afresh, and

acted itself out again, neither quicker nor slower than before. What he saw was this:

A long stretch of shore— shingle edged by sand, and intersected at short intervals with black groynes running down to the water— a scene, in fact, so like that of his afternoon's walk that, in the absence of any landmark, it could not be distinguished therefrom. The light was obscure, conveying an impression of gathering storm, late winter evening, and slight cold rain. On this bleak stage at first no actor was visible. Then, in the distance, a bobbing black object appeared; a moment more, and it was a man running, jumping, clambering over the groynes, and every few seconds looking eagerly back. The nearer he came the more obvious it was that he was not only anxious, but even terribly frightened, though his face was not to be distinguished. He was, moreover, almost at the end of his strength. On he came; each successive obstacle seemed to cause him more difficulty than the last. 'Will he get over this next one?' thought Parkins; 'it seems a little higher than the others.' Yes; half climbing, half throwing himself, he did get over, and fell all in a heap on the other side (the side nearest to the spectator). There, as if really unable to get up again, he remained crouching under the groyne, looking up in an attitude of painful anxiety.

So far no cause whatever for the fear of the runner had been shown; but now there began to be seen, far up the shore, a little flicker of something light-coloured moving to and fro with great swiftness and irregularity. Rapidly growing larger, it, too, declared itself as a figure in pale, fluttering draperies, ill-defined. There was something about its motion which made Parkins very unwilling to see it at close quarters. It would stop, raise arms, bow itself towards the sand, then run stooping across the beach to the water-edge and back again; and then, rising upright, once more continue its course forward at a speed that was startling and terrifying. The moment came when the pursuer was hovering about from left to right only a few yards beyond the groyne where the runner lay in hiding. After two or three ineffectual castings hither and thither it came to a stop, stood upright, with arms raised high, and then darted straight forward towards the groyne.

It was at this point that Parkins always failed in his resolution to keep his eyes shut. With many misgivings as to incipient failure of eyesight, overworked brain, excessive smoking, and so on, he finally resigned himself to light his candle, get out a book, and pass the night waking, rather than be tormented by this persistent panorama, which he saw clearly enough could only be a morbid reflection of his walk and his thoughts on that very day.

The scraping of match on box and the glare of light must have startled some creatures of the night— rats or what not— which he heard scurry across the floor from the side of his bed with much rustling. Dear, dear! the match is out! Fool that it is! But the second one burnt better, and a candle and book were duly procured, over which Parkins pored till sleep of a wholesome kind came upon him, and that in no long space. For about the first time in his orderly and prudent life he forgot to blow out the candle, and when he was called next morning at eight there was still a flicker in the socket and a sad mess of guttered grease on the top of the little table.

After breakfast he was in his room, putting the finishing touches to his golfing costume— fortune had again allotted the Colonel to him for a partner— when one of the maids came in.

‘Oh, if you please,’ she said, ’would you like any extra blankets on your bed, sir?’

‘Ah! thank you,’ said Parkins. ’Yes, I think I should like one. It seems likely to turn rather colder.’

In a very short time the maid was back with the blanket.

‘Which bed should I put it on, sir?’ she asked.

‘What? Why, that one— the one I slept in last night,’ he said, pointing to it.

’Oh yes! I beg your pardon, sir, but you seemed to have tried both of ’em; leastways, we had to make ’em both up this morning.’

‘Really? How very absurd!’ said Parkins. ’I certainly never touched the other, except to lay some things on it. Did it actually seem to have been slept in?’

‘Oh yes, sir!’ said the maid. ’Why, all the things was crumpled and throwed about all ways, if you’ll excuse me, sir— quite as if anyone ‘adn’t passed but a very poor night, sir.’

‘Dear me,’ said Parkins. ’Well, I may have disordered it more than I thought when I unpacked my things. I’m very sorry to have given you the extra trouble, I’m sure. I expect a friend of mine soon, by the way— a gentleman from Cambridge— to come and occupy it for a night or two. That will be all right, I suppose, won’t it?’

‘Oh yes, to be sure, sir. Thank you, sir. It’s no trouble, I’m sure,’ said the maid, and departed to giggle with her colleagues.

Parkins set forth, with a stern determination to improve his game.

I am glad to be able to report that he succeeded so far in this enterprise that the Colonel, who had been rather repining at the prospect of a second day’s play in his company, became quite chatty as the morning advanced; and his voice boomed out over the flats, as certain also of our own minor poets have said, ‘like some great bourdon in a minster tower’.

‘Extraordinary wind, that, we had last night,’ he said. ’In my old home we should have said someone had been whistling for it.’

‘Should you, indeed!’ said Perkins. ’Is there a superstition of that kind still current in your part of the country?’

‘I don’t know about superstition,’ said the Colonel. ’They believe in it all over Denmark and Norway, as well as on the Yorkshire coast; and my experience is, mind you, that there’s generally something at the bottom of what these country-folk hold to, and have held to for generations. But it’s your drive’ (or whatever it might have been: the golfing reader will have to imagine appropriate digressions at the proper intervals).

When conversation was resumed, Parkins said, with a slight hesitancy:

’A propos of what you were saying just now, Colonel, I think I ought to tell you that my own views on such subjects are very strong. I am, in fact, a convinced disbeliever in what is called the “supernatural".’

‘What!’ said the Colonel,’do you mean to tell me you don’t believe in second-sight, or ghosts, or anything of that kind?’

‘In nothing whatever of that kind,’ returned Parkins firmly.

‘Well,’ said the Colonel, ’but it appears to me at that rate, sir, that you must be little better than a Sadducee.’

Parkins was on the point of answering that, in his opinion, the Sadducees were the most sensible persons he had ever read of in the Old Testament; but feeling some doubt as to whether much mention of them was to be found in that work, he preferred to laugh the accusation off.

'Perhaps I am,' he said; 'but— Here, give me my cleek, boy!— Excuse me one moment, Colonel.' A short interval. 'Now, as to whistling for the wind, let me give you my theory about it. The laws which govern winds are really not at all perfectly known— to fisherfolk and such, of course, not known at all. A man or woman of eccentric habits, perhaps, or a stranger, is seen repeatedly on the beach at some unusual hour, and is heard whistling. Soon afterwards a violent wind rises; a man who could read the sky perfectly or who possessed a barometer could have foretold that it would. The simple people of a fishing-village have no barometers, and only a few rough rules for prophesying weather. What more natural than that the eccentric personage I postulated should be regarded as having raised the wind, or that he or she should clutch eagerly at the reputation of being able to do so? Now, take last night's wind: as it happens, I myself was whistling. I blew a whistle twice, and the wind seemed to come absolutely in answer to my call. If anyone had seen me— '

The audience had been a little restive under this harangue, and Parkins had, I fear, fallen somewhat into the tone of a lecturer; but at the last sentence the Colonel stopped.

'Whistling, were you?' he said. 'And what sort of whistle did you use? Play this stroke first.' Interval.

'About that whistle you were asking, Colonel. It's rather a curious one. I have it in my— No; I see I've left it in my room. As a matter of fact, I found it yesterday.'

And then Parkins narrated the manner of his discovery of the whistle, upon hearing which the Colonel grunted, and opined that, in Parkins's place, he should himself be careful about using a thing that had belonged to a set of Papists, of whom, speaking generally, it might be affirmed that you never knew what they might not have been up to. From this topic he diverged to the enormities of the Vicar, who had given notice on the previous Sunday that Friday would be the Feast of St Thomas the Apostle, and that there would be service at eleven

o’clock in the church. This and other similar proceedings constituted in the Colonel’s view a strong presumption that the Vicar was a concealed Papist, if not a Jesuit; and Parkins, who could not very readily follow the Colonel in this region, did not disagree with him. In fact, they got on so well together in the morning that there was not talk on either side of their separating after lunch.

Both continued to play well during the afternoon, or at least, well enough to make them forget everything else until the light began to fail them. Not until then did Parkins remember that he had meant to do some more investigating at the preceptory; but it was of no great importance, he reflected. One day was as good as another; he might as well go home with the Colonel.

As they turned the corner of the house, the Colonel was almost knocked down by a boy who rushed into him at the very top of his speed, and then, instead of running away, remained hanging on to him and panting. The first words of the warrior were naturally those of reproof and objurgation, but he very quickly discerned that the boy was almost speechless with fright. Inquiries were useless at first. When the boy got his breath he began to howl, and still clung to the Colonel’s legs. He was at last detached, but continued to howl.

’What in the world is the matter with you? What have you been up to? What have you seen?’ said the two men.

‘Ow, I seen it wive at me out of the winder,’ wailed the boy, ’and I don’t like it.’

‘What window?’ said the irritated Colonel. ’Come pull yourself together, my boy.’

’The front winder it was, at the ‘otel,’ said the boy.

At this point Parkins was in favour of sending the boy home, but the Colonel refused; he wanted to get to the bottom of it, he said; it was most dangerous to give a boy such a fright as this one had had, and if it turned out that people had been playing jokes, they should suffer for it in some way. And by a series of questions he made out this story: The boy had been playing about on the grass in front of the Globe with some others; then they had gone home to their teas, and he was just going, when he happened to look up at the front winder and see it a-wiving at him. *It* seemed to be a figure of some sort, in white as far as he knew— couldn’t see its face; but it wived at him,

and it warn't a right thing— not to say not a right person. Was there a light in the room? No, he didn't think to look if there was a light. Which was the window? Was it the top one or the second one? The seckind one it was— the big winder what got two little uns at the sides.

'Very well, my boy,' said the Colonel, after a few more questions. 'You run away home now. I expect it was some person trying to give you a start. Another time, like a brave English boy, you just throw a stone— well, no, not that exactly, but you go and speak to the waiter, or to Mr Simpson, the landlord, and— yes— and say that I advised you to do so.'

The boy's face expressed some of the doubt he felt as to the likelihood of Mr Simpson's lending a favourable ear to his complaint, but the Colonel did not appear to perceive this, and went on:

'And here's a sixpence— no, I see it's a shilling— and you be off home, and don't think any more about it.'

The youth hurried off with agitated thanks, and the Colonel and Parkins went round to the front of the Globe and reconnoitred. There was only one window answering to the description they had been hearing.

'Well, that's curious,' said Parkins; 'it's evidently my window the lad was talking about. Will you come up for a moment, Colonel Wilson? We ought to be able to see if anyone has been taking liberties in my room.'

They were soon in the passage, and Parkins made as if to open the door. Then he stopped and felt in his pockets.

'This is more serious than I thought,' was his next remark. 'I remember now that before I started this morning I locked the door. It is locked now, and, what is more, here is the key.' And he held it up. 'Now,' he went on, 'if the servants are in the habit of going into one's room during the day when one is away, I can only say that— well, that I don't approve of it at all.' Conscious of a somewhat weak climax, he busied himself in opening the door (which was indeed locked) and in lighting candles. 'No,' he said, 'nothing seems disturbed.'

'Except your bed,' put in the Colonel.

'Excuse me, that isn't my bed,' said Parkins. 'I don't use that one. But it does look as if someone had been playing tricks with it.'

It certainly did: the clothes were bundled up and twisted together in a most tortuous confusion. Parkins pondered.

'That must be it,' he said at last. 'I disordered the clothes last night in unpacking, and they haven't made it since. Perhaps they came in to make it, and that boy saw them through the window; and then they were called away and locked the door after them. Yes, I think that must be it.'

'Well, ring and ask,' said the Colonel, and this appealed to Parkins as practical.

The maid appeared, and, to make a long story short, deposed that she had made the bed in the morning when the gentleman was in the room, and hadn't been there since. No, she hadn't no other key. Mr Simpson, he kep' the keys; he'd be able to tell the gentleman if anyone had been up.

This was a puzzle. Investigation showed that nothing of value had been taken, and Parkins remembered the disposition of the small objects on tables and so forth well enough to be pretty sure that no pranks had been played with them. Mr and Mrs Simpson furthermore agreed that neither of them had given the duplicate key of the room to any person whatever during the day. Nor could Parkins, fair-minded man as he was, detect anything in the demeanour of master, mistress, or maid that indicated guilt. He was much more inclined to think that the boy had been imposing on the Colonel.

The latter was unwontedly silent and pensive at dinner and throughout the evening. When he bade goodnight to Parkins, he murmured in a gruff undertone:

'You know where I am if you want me during the night.'

'Why, yes, thank you, Colonel Wilson, I think I do; but there isn't much prospect of my disturbing you, I hope. By the way,' he added, 'did I show you that old whistle I spoke of? I think not. Well, here it is.'

The Colonel turned it over gingerly in the light of the candle.

'Can you make anything of the inscription?' asked Parkins, as he took it back.

'No, not in this light. What do you mean to do with it?'

'Oh, well, when I get back to Cambridge I shall submit it to some of the archaeologists there, and see what they think of it; and very likely, if they consider it worth having, I may present it to one of the museums.'

‘M!’ said the Colonel. ’Well, you may be right. All I know is that, if it were mine, I should chuck it straight into the sea. It’s no use talking, I’m well aware, but I expect that with you it’s a case of live and learn. I hope so, I’m sure, and I wish you a good night.’

He turned away, leaving Parkins in act to speak at the bottom of the stair, and soon each was in his own bedroom.

By some unfortunate accident, there were neither blinds nor curtains to the windows of the Professor’s room. The previous night he had thought little of this, but tonight there seemed every prospect of a bright moon rising to shine directly on his bed, and probably wake him later on. When he noticed this he was a good deal annoyed, but, with an ingenuity which I can only envy, he succeeded in rigging up, with the help of a railway-rug, some safety-pins, and a stick and umbrella, a screen which, if it only held together, would completely keep the moonlight off his bed. And shortly afterwards he was comfortably in that bed. When he had read a somewhat solid work long enough to produce a decided wish to sleep, he cast a drowsy glance round the room, blew out the candle, and fell back upon the pillow.

He must have slept soundly for an hour or more, when a sudden clatter shook him up in a most unwelcome manner. In a moment he realized what had happened: his carefully-constructed screen had given way, and a very bright frosty moon was shining directly on his face. This was highly annoying. Could he possibly get up and reconstruct the screen? or could he manage to sleep if he did not?

For some minutes he lay and pondered over all the possibilities; then he turned over sharply, and with his eyes open lay breathlessly listening. There had been a movement, he was sure, in the empty bed on the opposite side of the room. Tomorrow he would have it moved, for there must be rats or something playing about in it. It was quiet now. No! the commotion began again. There was a rustling and shaking: surely more than any rat could cause.

I can figure to myself something of the Professor’s bewilderment and horror, for I have in a dream thirty years back seen the same thing happen; but the reader will hardly, perhaps, imagine how dreadful it was to him to see a figure suddenly sit

up in what he had known was an empty bed. He was out of his own bed in one bound, and made a dash towards the window, where lay his only weapon, the stick with which he had propped his screen. This was, as it turned out, the worst thing he could have done, because the personage in the empty bed, with a sudden smooth motion, slipped from the bed and took up a position, with outspread arms, between the two beds, and in front of the door. Parkins watched it in a horrid perplexity. Somehow, the idea of getting past it and escaping through the door was intolerable to him; he could not have borne— he didn't know why— to touch it; and as for its touching him, he would sooner dash himself through the window than have that happen. It stood for the moment in a band of dark shadow, and he had not seen what its face was like. Now it began to move, in a stooping posture, and all at once the spectator realized, with some horror and some relief, that it must be blind, for it seemed to feel about it with its muffled arms in a groping and random fashion. Turning half away from him, it became suddenly conscious of the bed he had just left, and darted towards it, and bent and felt over the pillows in a way which made Parkins shudder as he had never in his life thought it possible. In a very few moments it seemed to know that the bed was empty, and then, moving forward into the area of light and facing the window, it showed for the first time what manner of thing it was.

Parkins, who very much dislikes being questioned about it, did once describe something of it in my hearing, and I gathered that what he chiefly remembers about it is a horrible, an intensely horrible, face *of crumpled linen.* What expression he read upon it he could not or would not tell, but that the fear of it went nigh to maddening him is certain.

But he was not at leisure to watch it for long. With formidable quickness it moved into the middle of the room, and, as it groped and waved, one corner of its draperies swept across Parkins's face. He could not, though he knew how perilous a sound was— he could not keep back a cry of disgust, and this gave the searcher an instant clue. It leapt towards him upon the instant, and the next moment he was half-way through the window backwards, uttering cry upon cry at the utmost pitch of his voice, and the linen face was thrust close into his own. At

this, almost the last possible second, deliverance came, as you will have guessed: the Colonel burst the door open, and was just in time to see the dreadful group at the window. When he reached the figures only one was left. Parkins sank forward into the room in a faint, and before him on the floor lay a tumbled heap of bed-clothes.

Colonel Wilson asked no questions, but busied himself in keeping everyone else out of the room and in getting Parkins back to his bed; and himself, wrapped in a rug, occupied the other bed, for the rest of the night. Early on the next day Rogers arrived, more welcome than he would have been a day before, and the three of them held a very long consultation in the Professor's room. At the end of it the Colonel left the hotel door carrying a small object between his finger and thumb, which he cast as far into the sea as a very brawny arm could send it. Later on the smoke of a burning ascended from the back premises of the Globe.

Exactly what explanation was patched up for the staff and visitors at the hotel I must confess I do not recollect. The Professor was somehow cleared of the ready suspicion of delirium tremens, and the hotel of the reputation of a troubled house.

There is not much question as to what would have happened to Parkins if the Colonel had not intervened when he did. He would either have fallen out of the window or else lost his wits. But it is not so evident what more the creature that came in answer to the whistle could have done than frighten. There seemed to be absolutely nothing material about it save the bed-clothes of which it had made itself a body. The Colonel, who remembered a not very dissimilar occurrence in India, was of the opinion that if Parkins had closed with it it could really have done very little, and that its one power was that of frightening. The whole thing, he said, served to confirm his opinion of the Church of Rome.

There is really nothing more to tell, but, as you may imagine, the Professor's views on certain points are less clear cut than they used to be. His nerves, too, have suffered: he cannot even now see a surplice hanging on a door quite unmoved, and the spectacle of a scarecrow in a field late on a winter afternoon has cost him more than one sleepless night.

THE TREASURE OF ABBOT THOMAS

I

> *Verum usque in praesentem diem multa garriunt inter se Canonici de abscondito quodam istius Abbatis Thomae thesauro, quem saepe, quanquam ahduc incassum, quaesiverunt Steinfeldenses. Ipsum enim Thomam adhuc florida in aetate existentem ingentem auri massam circa monasterium defodisse perhibent; de quo multoties interrogatus ubi esset, cum risu respondere solitus erat: 'Job, Johannes, et Zacharias vel vobis vel posteris indicabunt'; idemque aliquando adiicere se inventuris minime invisurum. Inter alia huius Abbatis opera, hoc memoria praecipue dignum indico quod fenestram magnam in orientali parte alae australis in ecclesia sua imaginibus optime in vitro depictis impleverit: id quod et ipsius effigies et insignia ibidem posita demonstrant. Domum quoque Abbatialem fere totam restauravit: puteo in atrio ipsius effosso et lapidibus marmoreis pulchre caelatis exornato. Decessit autem, morte aliquantulum subitanea perculsus, aetatis suae anno lxxii(do), incarnationis vero Dominicae mdxxix(o).*

'I suppose I shall have to translate this,' said the antiquary to himself, as he finished copying the above lines from that rather rare and exceedingly diffuse book, the*Sertum Steinfeldense Norbertinum.*[5] 'Well, it may as well be done first as last,' and accordingly the following rendering was very quickly produced:

> Up to the present day there is much gossip among the Canons about a certain hidden treasure of this Abbot Thomas, for which those of Steinfeld have often made search, though hitherto in vain. The story is that Thomas, while yet in the vigour of life, concealed a very

5.An account of the Premonstratensian abbey of Steinfeld, in the Eiffel, with lives of the Abbots, published at Cologne in 1712 by Christian Albert Erhard, a resident in the district. The epithet Norbertinum is due to the fact that St Norbert was founder of the Premonstratensian Order.

> large quantity of gold somewhere in the monastery. He was often asked where it was, and always answered, with a laugh: 'Job, John, and Zechariah will tell either you or your successors.' He sometimes added that he should feel no grudge against those who might find it. Among other works carried out by this Abbot I may specially mention his filling the great window at the east end of the south aisle of the church with figures admirably painted on glass, as his effigy and arms in the window attest. He also restored almost the whole of the Abbot's lodging, and dug a well in the court of it, which he adorned with beautiful carvings in marble. He died rather suddenly in the seventy-second year of his age, A.D. 1529.

The object which the antiquary had before him at the moment was that of tracing the whereabouts of the painted windows of the Abbey Church at Steinfeld. Shortly after the Revolution, a very large quantity of painted glass made its way from the dissolved abbeys of Germany and Belgium to this country, and may now be seen adorning various of our parish churches, cathedrals, and private chapels. Steinfeld Abbey was among the most considerable of these involuntary contributors to our artistic possession (I am quoting the somewhat ponderous preamble of the book which the antiquary wrote), and the greater part of the glass from that institution can be identified without much difficulty by the help, either of the numerous inscriptions in which the place is mentioned, or of the subjects of the windows, in which several well-defined cycles or narratives were represented.

The passage with which I began my story had set the antiquary on the track of another identification. In a private chapel— no matter where— he had seen three large figures, each occupying a whole light in a window, and evidently the work of one artist. Their style made it plain that that artist had been a German of the sixteenth century; but hitherto the more exact localizing of them had been a puzzle. They represented— will you be surprised to hear it?— JOB PATRIARCHA, JOHANNES EVANGELISTA, ZACHARIAS PROPHETA, and each of them held a book or scroll, inscribed with a sentence

from his writings. These, as a matter of course, the antiquary had noted, and had been struck by the curious way in which they differed from any text of the Vulgate that he had been able to examine. Thus the scroll in Job's hand was inscribed: *Auro est locus in quo absconditur* (for *conflatur*)[6]; on the book of John was: *Habent in vestimentis suis scripturam quam nemo novit*[7] (for in *vestimento scriptum*, the following words being taken from another verse); and Zacharias had: *Super lapidem unum septem oculi sunt*[8] (which alone of the three presents an unaltered text).

A sad perplexity it had been to our investigator to think why these three personages should have been placed together in one window. There was no bond of connexion between them, either historic, symbolic, or doctrinal, and he could only suppose that they must have formed part of a very large series of Prophets and Apostles, which might have filled, say, all the clerestory windows of some capacious church. But the passage from the *Sertum* had altered the situation by showing that the names of the actual personages represented in the glass now in Lord D—— 's chapel had been constantly on the lips of Abbot Thomas von Eschenhausen of Steinfeld, and that this Abbot had put up a painted window, probably about the year 1520, in the south aisle of his abbey church. It was no very wild conjecture that the three figures might have formed part of Abbot Thomas's offering; it was one which, moreover, could probably be confirmed or set aside by another careful examination of the glass. And, as Mr. Somerton was a man of leisure, he set out on pilgrimage to the private chapel with very little delay. His conjecture was confirmed to the full. Not only did the style and technique of the glass suit perfectly with the date and place required, but in another window of the chapel he found some glass, known to have been bought along with the figures, which contained the arms of Abbot Thomas von Eschenhausen.

At intervals during his researches Mr. Somerton had been haunted by the recollection of the gossip about the hidden treasure, and, as he thought the matter over, it became more and more obvious to him that if the Abbot meant anything by

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6.There is a place for gold where it is hidden.
7.They have on their raiment a writing which no man knoweth.
8.Upon one stone are seven eyes.

the enigmatical answer which he gave to his questioners, he must have meant that the secret was to be found somewhere in the window he had placed in the abbey church. It was undeniable, furthermore, that the first of the curiously-selected texts on the scrolls in the window might be taken to have a reference to hidden treasure.

Every feature, therefore, or mark which could possibly assist in elucidating the riddle which, he felt sure, the Abbot had set to posterity he noted with scrupulous care, and, returning to his Berkshire manor-house, consumed many a pint of the midnight oil over his tracings and sketches. After two or three weeks, a day came when Mr Somerton announced to his man that he must pack his own and his master's things for a short journey abroad, whither for the moment we will not follow him.

II

Mr Gregory, the Rector of Parsbury, had strolled out before breakfast, it being a fine autumn morning, as far as the gate of his carriage-drive, with intent to meet the postman and sniff the cool air. Nor was he disappointed of either purpose. Before he had had time to answer more than ten or eleven of the miscellaneous questions propounded to him in the lightness of their hearts by his young offspring, who had accompanied him, the postman was seen approaching; and among the morning's budget was one letter bearing a foreign postmark and stamp (which became at once the objects of an eager competition among the youthful Gregorys), and addressed in an uneducated, but plainly an English hand.

When the Rector opened it, and turned to the signature, he realized that it came from the confidential valet of his friend and squire, Mr. Somerton. Thus it ran:

> Honoured Sir,
> Has I am in a great anxiety about Master I write at is
> Wish to beg you Sir if you could be so good as Step over.
> Master Has add a Nastey Shock and keeps His Bedd. I
> never Have known Him like this but No wonder and
> Nothing will serve but you Sir. Master says would I min-
> tion the Short Way Here is Drive to Cobblince and take a
> Trap. Hopeing I Have maid all Plain, but am much

Confused in Myself what with Anxiatey and Weakfulness at Night. If I might be so Bold Sir it will be a Pleasure to see a Honnest Brish Face among all These Forig ones.
I am Sir
Your obed't Serv't
William Brown.
P.S.— The Village for Town I will not Turm It is name Steenfeld.

The reader must be left to picture to himself in detail the surprise, confusion, and hurry of preparation into which the receipt of such a letter would be likely to plunge a quiet Berkshire parsonage in the year of grace 1859. It is enough for me to say that a train to town was caught in the course of the day, and that Mr Gregory was able to secure a cabin in the Antwerp boat and a place in the Coblenz train. Nor was it difficult to manage the transit from that centre to Steinfeld.

I labour under a grave disadvantage as narrator of this story in that I have never visited Steinfeld myself, and that neither of the principal actors in the episode (from whom I derive my information) was able to give me anything but a vague and rather dismal idea of its appearance. I gather that it is a small place, with a large church despoiled of its ancient fittings; a number of rather ruinous great buildings, mostly of the seventeenth century, surround this church; for the abbey, in common with most of those on the Continent, was rebuilt in a luxurious fashion by its inhabitants at that period. It has not seemed to me worth while to lavish money on a visit to the place, for though it is probably far more attractive than either Mr Somerton or Mr Gregory thought it, there is evidently little, if anything, of first-rate interest to be seen— except, perhaps, one thing, which I should not care to see.

The inn where the English gentleman and his servant were lodged is, or was, the only 'possible' one in the village. Mr Gregory was taken to it at once by his driver, and found Mr Brown waiting at the door. Mr Brown, a model when in his Berkshire home of the impassive whiskered race who are known as confidential valets, was now egregiously out of his element, in a light tweed suit, anxious, almost irritable, and plainly anything but master of the situation. His relief at the

sight of the 'honest British face' of his Rector was unmeasured, but words to describe it were denied him. He could only say:

'Well, I ham pleased, I'm sure, sir, to see you. And so I'm sure, sir, will master.'

'How is your master, Brown?' Mr Gregory eagerly put in.

'I think he's better, sir, thank you; but he's had a dreadful time of it. I 'ope he's gettin' some sleep now, but— '

'What has been the matter— I couldn't make out from your letter? Was it an accident of any kind?'

'Well, sir, I 'ardly know whether I'd better speak about it. Master was very partickler he should be the one to tell you. But there's no bones broke— that's one thing I'm sure we ought to be thankful— '

'What does the doctor say?' asked Mr Gregory.

They were by this time outside Mr Somerton's bedroom door, and speaking in low tones. Mr Gregory, who happened to be in front, was feeling for the handle, and chanced to run his fingers over the panels. Before Brown could answer, there was a terrible cry from within the room.

'In God's name, who is that?' were the first words they heard. 'Brown, is it?'

'Yes, sir— me, sir, and Mr Gregory,' Brown hastened to answer, and there was an audible groan of relief in reply.

They entered the room, which was darkened against the afternoon sun, and Mr Gregory saw, with a shock of pity, how drawn, how damp with drops of fear, was the usually calm face of his friend, who, sitting up in the curtained bed, stretched out a shaking hand to welcome him.

'Better for seeing you, my dear Gregory,' was the reply to the Rector's first question, and it was palpably true.

After five minutes of conversation Mr Somerton was more his own man, Brown afterwards reported, than he had been for days. He was able to eat a more than respectable dinner, and talked confidently of being fit to stand a journey to Coblenz within twenty-four hours.

'But there's one thing,' he said, with a return of agitation which Mr Gregory did not like to see, 'which I must beg you to do for me, my dear Gregory. Don't,' he went on, laying his hand on Gregory's to forestall any interruption— 'don't ask me what it is, or why I want it done. I'm not up to explaining it yet;

it would throw me back— undo all the good you have done me by coming. The only word I will say about it is that you run no risk whatever by doing it, and that Brown can and will show you tomorrow what it is. It's merely to put back— to keep— something— No; I can't speak of it yet. Do you mind calling Brown?'

'Well, Somerton,' said Mr Gregory, as he crossed the room to the door. 'I won't ask for any explanations till you see fit to give them. And if this bit of business is as easy as you represent it to be, I will very gladly undertake it for you the first thing in the morning.'

'Ah, I was sure you would, my dear Gregory; I was certain I could rely on you. I shall owe you more thanks than I can tell. Now, here is Brown. Brown, one word with you.'

'Shall I go?' interjected Mr Gregory.

'Not at all. Dear me, no. Brown, the first thing tomorrow morning— (you don't mind early hours, I know, Gregory)— you must take the Rector to—know' (a nod from Brown, who looked grave and anxious), 'and he and you will put that back. You needn't be in the least alarmed; it's *perfectly* safe in the daytime. You know what I mean. It lies on the step, you know, where— where we put it.' (Brown swallowed dryly once or twice, and, failing to speak, bowed.) 'And— yes, that's all. Only this one other word, my dear Gregory. If you *can* manage to keep from questioning Brown about this matter, I shall be still more bound to you. Tomorrow evening, at latest, if all goes well, I shall be able, I believe, to tell you the whole story from start to finish. And now I'll wish you good night. Brown will be with me— he sleeps here— and if I were you, I should lock my door. Yes, be particular to do that. They— they like it, the people here, and it's better. Good night, good night.'

They parted upon this, and if Mr Gregory woke once or twice in the small hours and fancied he heard a fumbling about the lower part of his locked door, it was, perhaps, no more than what a quiet man, suddenly plunged into a strange bed and the heart of a mystery, might reasonably expect. Certainly he thought, to the end of his days, that he had heard such a sound twice or three times between midnight and dawn.

He was up with the sun, and out in company with Brown soon after. Perplexing as was the service he had been asked to

perform for Mr Somerton, it was not a difficult or an alarming one, and within half an hour from his leaving the inn it was over. What it was I shall not as yet divulge.

Later in the morning Mr Somerton, now almost himself again, was able to make a start from Steinfeld; and that same evening, whether at Coblenz or at some intermediate stage on the journey I am not certain, he settled down to the promised explanation. Brown was present, but how much of the matter was ever really made plain to his comprehension he would never say, and I am unable to conjecture.

III

This was Mr Somerton's story:

'You know roughly, both of you, that this expedition of mine was undertaken with the object of tracing something in connexion with some old painted glass in Lord D—— 's private chapel. Well, the starting-point of the whole matter lies in this passage from an old printed book, to which I will ask your attention.'

And at this point Mr Somerton went carefully over some ground with which we are already familiar.

'On my second visit to the chapel,' he went on, 'my purpose was to take every note I could of figures, lettering, diamond-scratchings on the glass, and even apparently accidental markings. The first point which I tackled was that of the inscribed scrolls. I could not doubt that the first of these, that of Job— "There is a place for the gold where it is hidden"— with its intentional alteration, must refer to the treasure; so I applied myself with some confidence to the next, that of St John— "They have on their vestures a writing which no man knoweth." The natural question will have occurred to you: Was there an inscription on the robes of the figures? I could see none; each of the three had a broad black border to his mantle, which made a conspicuous and rather ugly feature in the window. I was nonplussed, I will own, and, but for a curious bit of luck, I think I should have left the search where the Canons of Steinfeld had left it before me. But it so happened that there was a good deal of dust on the surface of the glass, and Lord D—— , happening to come in, noticed my blackened hands, and kindly insisted on sending for a Turk's head broom to clean down the window.

There must, I suppose, have been a rough piece in the broom; anyhow, as it passed over the border of one of the mantles, I noticed that it left a long scratch, and that some yellow stain instantly showed up. I asked the man to stop his work for a moment, and ran up the ladder to examine the place. The yellow stain was there, sure enough, and what had come away was a thick black pigment, which had evidently been laid on with the brush after the glass had been burnt, and could therefore be easily scraped off without doing any harm. I scraped, accordingly, and you will hardly believe— no, I do you an injustice; you will have guessed already— that I found under this black pigment two or three clearly-formed capital letters in yellow stain on a clear ground. Of course, I could hardly contain my delight.

'I told Lord D—— that I had detected an inscription which I thought might be very interesting, and begged to be allowed to uncover the whole of it. He made no difficulty about it whatever, told me to do exactly as I pleased, and then, having an engagement, was obliged— rather to my relief, I must say— to leave me. I set to work at once, and found the task a fairly easy one. The pigment, disintegrated, of course, by time, came off almost at a touch, and I don't think that it took me a couple of hours, all told, to clean the whole of the black borders in all three lights. Each of the figures had, as the inscription said, "a writing on their vestures which nobody knew".

'This discovery, of course, made it absolutely certain to my mind that I was on the right track. And, now, what was the inscription? While I was cleaning the glass I almost took pains not to read the lettering, saving up the treat until I had got the whole thing clear. And when that was done, my dear Gregory, I assure you I could almost have cried from sheer disappointment. What I read was only the most hopeless jumble of letters that was ever shaken up in a hat. Here it is:

Job. DREVICIOPEDMOOMSMVIVLISLCAV
IBASBATAOVT
St John. RDIIEAMRLESIPVSPODSEEIRSETTA
AESGIAVNNR
Zechariah. FTEEAILNQDPVAIVMTLEEATTOHIOO
NVMCAAT.H.Q.E.

’Blank as I felt and must have looked for the first few minutes, my disappointment didn’t last long. I realized almost at once that I was dealing with a cipher or cryptogram; and I reflected that it was likely to be of a pretty simple kind, considering its early date. So I copied the letters with the most anxious care. Another little point, I may tell you, turned up in the process which confirmed my belief in the cipher. After copying the letters on Job’s robe I counted them, to make sure that I had them right. There were thirty-eight; and, just as I finished going through them, my eye fell on a scratching made with a sharp point on the edge of the border. It was simply the number xxxviii in Roman numerals. To cut the matter short, there was a similar note, as I may call it, in each of the other lights; and that made it plain to me that the glass-painter had had very strict orders from Abbot Thomas about the inscription and had taken pains to get it correct.

’Well, after that discovery you may imagine how minutely I went over the whole surface of the glass in search of further light. Of course, I did not neglect the inscription on the scroll of Zechariah— “Upon one stone are seven eyes,” but I very quickly concluded that this must refer to some mark on a stone which could only be found *in situ*, where the treasure was concealed. To be short, I made all possible notes and sketches and tracings, and then came back to Parsbury to work out the cipher at leisure. Oh, the agonies I went through! I thought myself very clever at first, for I made sure that the key would be found in some of the old books on secret writing. The *Steganographia* of Joachim Trithemius, who was an earlier contemporary of Abbot Thomas, seemed particularly promising; so I got that and Selenius’s *Cryptographia* and Bacon’s *de Augmentis Scientiarum* and some more. But I could hit upon nothing. Then I tried the principle of the “most frequent letter”, taking first Latin and then German as a basis. That didn’t help, either; whether it ought to have done so, I am not clear. And then I came back to the window itself, and read over my notes, hoping almost against hope that the Abbot might himself have somewhere supplied the key I wanted. I could make nothing out of the colour or pattern of the robes. There were no landscape backgrounds with subsidiary objects; there was nothing in the canopies. The only resource possible

seemed to be in the attitudes of the figures. “Job,” I read: “scroll in left hand, forefinger of right hand extended upwards. John: holds inscribed book in left hand; with right hand blesses, with two fingers. Zechariah: scroll in left hand; right hand extended upwards, as Job, but with three fingers pointing up.” In other words, I reflected, Job has one finger extended, John has *two*, Zechariah has *three*. May not there be a numerical key concealed in that? My dear Gregory,’ said Mr Somerton, laying his hand on his friend’s knee, ’that *was* the key. I didn’t get it to fit at first, but after two or three trials I saw what was meant. After the first letter of the inscription you skip *one* letter, after the next you skip *two*, and after that skip *three*. Now look at the result I got. I’ve underlined the letters which form words:

[D]R[E]VI[C]IOP[E]D[M]OO[M]SMV[I]V[L]IS[L]CAV [I]B[A]SB[A]TAO[V]T[R]DI[I]EAM[R]L[E]SI[P]VSP[O]D[S]EE[I]RSE[T]T[A] AE[S]GIA[V]N[N]R F[T]EEA[I]L[N]QD[P]VAI[V]M[T]LE[E]ATT[O]H[I]OO[N]VMC[A]A[T].H.Q.E.

’Do you see it? “*Decem millia auri reposita sunt in puteo in at … ”* (Ten thousand [pieces] of gold are laid up in a well in …), followed by an incomplete word beginning *at*. So far so good. I tried the same plan with the remaining letters; but it wouldn’t work, and I fancied that perhaps the placing of dots after the three last letters might indicate some difference of procedure. Then I thought to myself, “Wasn’t there some allusion to a well in the account of Abbot Thomas in that book the ’*Sertum*’?” Yes, there was; he built a *puteus in atrio*; (a well in the court). There, of course, was my word *atrio*. The next step was to copy out the remaining letters of the inscription, omitting those I had already used. That gave what you will see on this slip:

RVIIOPDOOSMVVISCAVBSBTAOTDIEAMLSIVSPDEERSETAEGIANRF

’Now, I knew what the three first letters I wanted were— namely, *rio*— to complete the word *atrio*; and, as you will see, these are all to be found in the first five letters. I was a little confused at first by the occurrence of two *i*’s, but very soon I saw that every alternate letter must be taken in the remainder

of the inscription. You can work it out for yourself; the result, continuing where the first “round” left off, thus:

> *rio domus abbatialis de Steinfeld a me, Thoma, qui posui custodemsuper ea. Gare à qui la touche*.

’So the whole secret was out:

> “Ten thousand pieces of gold are laid up in the well in the court of the Abbot’s house of Steinfeld by me, Thomas, who have set a guardian over them. *Gare à qui la louche*.”

’The last words, I ought to say, are a device which Abbot Thomas had adopted. I found it with his arms in another piece of glass at Lord D—— ’s, and he drafted it bodily into his cipher, though it doesn’t quite fit in point of grammar.

’Well, what would any human being have been tempted to do, my dear Gregory, in my place? Could he have helped setting off, as I did, to Steinfeld, and tracing the secret literally to the fountain-head? I don’t believe he could. Anyhow, I couldn’t, and, as I needn’t tell you, I found myself at Steinfeld as soon as the resources of civilization could put me there, and installed myself in the inn you saw. I must tell you that I was not altogether free from forebodings— on one hand of disappointment, on the other of danger. There was always the possibility that Abbot Thomas’s well might have been wholly obliterated, or else that someone, ignorant of cryptograms, and guided only by luck, might have stumbled on the treasure before me. And then’— there was a very perceptible shaking of the voice here— ’I was not entirely easy, I need not mind confessing, as to the meaning of the words about the guardian of the treasure. But, if you don’t mind, I’ll say no more about that until— until it becomes necessary.

’At the first possible opportunity Brown and I began exploring the place. I had naturally represented myself as being interested in the remains of the abbey, and we could not avoid paying a visit to the church, impatient as I was to be elsewhere. Still, it did interest me to see the windows where the glass had been, and especially that at the east end of the south aisle. In the tracery lights of that I was startled to see some

fragments and coats-of-arms remaining— Abbot Thomas's shield was there, and a small figure with a scroll inscribed *Oculos habent, et non videbunt* (They have eyes, and shall not see), which, I take it, was a hit of the Abbot at his Canons.

'But, of course, the principal object was to find the Abbot's house. There is no prescribed place for this, so far as I know, in the plan of a monastery; you can't predict of it, as you can of the chapter-house, that it will be on the eastern side of the cloister, or, as of the dormitory, that it will communicate with a transept of the church. I felt that if I asked many questions I might awaken lingering memories of the treasure, and I thought it best to try first to discover it for myself. It was not a very long or difficult search. That three-sided court south-east of the church, with deserted piles of building round it, and grass-grown pavement, which you saw this morning, was the place. And glad enough I was to see that it was put to no use, and was neither very far from our inn nor overlooked by any inhabited building; there were only orchards and paddocks on the slopes east of the church. I can tell you that fine stone glowed wonderfully in the rather watery yellow sunset that we had on the Tuesday afternoon.

'Next, what about the well? There was not much doubt about that, as you can testify. It is really a very remarkable thing. That curb is, I think, of Italian marble, and the carving I thought must be Italian also. There were reliefs, you will perhaps remember, of Eliezer and Rebekah, and of Jacob opening the well for Rachel, and similar subjects; but, by way of disarming suspicion, I suppose, the Abbot had carefully abstained from any of his cynical and allusive inscriptions.

'I examined the whole structure with the keenest interest, of course— a square well-head with an opening in one side; an arch over it, with a wheel for the rope to pass over, evidently in very good condition still, for it had been used within sixty years, or perhaps even later though not quite recently. Then there was the question of depth and access to the interior. I suppose the depth was about sixty to seventy feet; and as to the other point, it really seemed as if the Abbot had wished to lead searchers up to the very door of his treasure-house, for, as you tested for yourself, there were big blocks of stone bonded

into the masonry, and leading down in a regular staircase round and round the inside of the well.

'It seemed almost too good to be true. I wondered if there was a trap— if the stones were so contrived as to tip over when a weight was placed on them; but I tried a good many with my own weight and with my stick, and all seemed, and actually were, perfectly firm. Of course, I resolved that Brown and I would make an experiment that very night.

'I was well prepared. Knowing the sort of place I should have to explore, I had brought a sufficiency of good rope and bands of webbing to surround my body, and cross-bars to hold to, as well as lanterns and candles and crowbars, all of which would go into a single carpet-bag and excite no suspicion. I satisfied myself that my rope would be long enough, and that the wheel for the bucket was in good working order, and then we went home to dinner.

'I had a little cautious conversation with the landlord, and made out that he would not be overmuch surprised if I went out for a stroll with my man about nine o'clock, to make (Heaven forgive me!) a sketch of the abbey by moonlight. I asked no questions about the well, and am not likely to do so now. I fancy I know as much about it as anyone in Steinfeld: at least'— with a strong shudder— 'I don't want to know any more.

'Now we come to the crisis, and, though I hate to think of it, I feel sure, Gregory, that it will be better for me in all ways to recall it just as it happened. We started, Brown and I, at about nine with our bag, and attracted no attention; for we managed to slip out at the hinder end of the inn-yard into an alley which brought us quite to the edge of the village. In five minutes we were at the well, and for some little time we sat on the edge of the well-head to make sure that no one was stirring or spying on us. All we heard was some horses cropping grass out of sight farther down the eastern slope. We were perfectly unobserved, and had plenty of light from the gorgeous full moon to allow us to get the rope properly fitted over the wheel. Then I secured the band round my body beneath the arms. We attached the end of the rope very securely to a ring in the stonework. Brown took the lighted lantern and followed me; I had a crowbar. And so we began to descend cautiously, feeling every

step before we set foot on it, and scanning the walls in search of any marked stone.

'Half aloud I counted the steps as we went down, and we got as far as the thirty-eighth before I noted anything at all irregular in the surface of the masonry. Even here there was no mark, and I began to feel very blank, and to wonder if the Abbot's cryptogram could possibly be an elaborate hoax. At the forty-ninth step the staircase ceased. It was with a very sinking heart that I began retracing my steps, and when I was back on the thirty-eighth— Brown, with the lantern, being a step or two above me— I scrutinized the little bit of irregularity in the stonework with all my might; but there was no vestige of a mark.

'Then it struck me that the texture of the surface looked just a little smoother than the rest, or, at least, in some way different. It might possibly be cement and not stone. I gave it a good blow with my iron bar. There was a decidedly hollow sound, though that might be the result of our being in a well. But there was more. A great flake of cement dropped on to my feet, and I saw marks on the stone underneath. I had tracked the Abbot down, my dear Gregory; even now I think of it with a certain pride. It took but a very few more taps to clear the whole of the cement away, and I saw a slab of stone about two feet square, upon which was engraven a cross. Disappointment again, but only for a moment. It was you, Brown, who reassured me by a casual remark. You said, if I remember right:

"'It's a funny cross: looks like a lot of eyes."

'I snatched the lantern out of your hand, and saw with inexpressible pleasure that the cross was composed of seven eyes, four in a vertical line, three horizontal. The last of the scrolls in the window was explained in the way I had anticipated. Here was my "stone with the seven eyes". So far the Abbot's data had been exact, and as I thought of this, the anxiety about the "guardian" returned upon me with increased force. Still I wasn't going to retreat now.

'Without giving myself time to think, I knocked away the cement all round the marked stone, and then gave it a prise on the right side with my crowbar. It moved at once, and I saw that it was but a thin light slab, such as I could easily lift out myself, and that it stopped the entrance to a cavity. I did lift it

out unbroken, and set it on the step, for it might be very important to us to be able to replace it. Then I waited for several minutes on the step just above. I don't know why, but I think to see if any dreadful thing would rush out. Nothing happened. Next I lit a candle, and very cautiously I placed it inside the cavity, with some idea of seeing whether there were foul air, and of getting a glimpse of what was inside. There *was* some foulness of air which nearly extinguished the flame, but in no long time it burned quite steadily. The hole went some little way back, and also on the right and left of the entrance, and I could see some rounded light-coloured objects within which might be bags. There was no use in waiting. I faced the cavity, and looked in. There was nothing immediately in the front of the hole. I put my arm in and felt to the right, very gingerly… .

'Just give me a glass of cognac, Brown. I'll go on in a moment, Gregory… .

'Well, I felt to the right, and my fingers touched something curved, that felt— yes— more or less like leather; dampish it was, and evidently part of a heavy, full thing. There was nothing, I must say, to alarm one. I grew bolder, and putting both hands in as well as I could, I pulled it to me, and it came. It was heavy, but moved more easily than I had expected. As I pulled it towards the entrance, my left elbow knocked over and extinguished the candle. I got the thing fairly in front of the mouth and began drawing it out. Just then Brown gave a sharp ejaculation and ran quickly up the steps with the lantern. He will tell you why in a moment. Startled as I was, I looked round after him, and saw him stand for a minute at the top and then walk away a few yards. Then I heard him call softly, "All right, sir," and went on pulling out the great bag, in complete darkness. It hung for an instant on the edge of the hole, then slipped forward on to my chest, and *put its arms round my neck*.

'My dear Gregory, I am telling you the exact truth. I believe I am now acquainted with the extremity of terror and repulsion which a man can endure without losing his mind. I can only just manage to tell you now the bare outline of the experience. I was conscious of a most horrible smell of mould, and of a cold kind of face pressed against my own, and moving slowly over it, and of several— I don't know how many— legs or arms or tentacles or something clinging to my body. I screamed out,

Brown says, like a beast, and fell away backward from the step on which I stood, and the creature slipped downwards, I suppose, on to that same step. Providentially the band round me held firm. Brown did not lose his head, and was strong enough to pull me up to the top and get me over the edge quite promptly. How he managed it exactly I don't know, and I think he would find it hard to tell you. I believe he contrived to hide our implements in the deserted building near by, and with very great difficulty he got me back to the inn. I was in no state to make explanations, and Brown knows no German; but next morning I told the people some tale of having had a bad fall in the abbey ruins, which I suppose they believed. And now, before I go further, I should just like you to hear what Brown's experiences during those few minutes were. Tell the Rector, Brown, what you told me.'

'Well, sir,' said Brown, speaking low and nervously, 'it was just this way. Master was busy down in front of the 'olé, and I was 'olding the lantern and looking on, when I 'eard somethink drop in the water from the top, as I thought. So I looked up, and I see someone's 'ead lookin' over at us. I s'pose I must ha' said somethink, and I 'eld the light up and run up the steps, and my light shone right on the face. That was a bad un, sir, if ever I see one! A holdish man, and the face very much fell in, and larfin', as I thought. And I got up the steps as quick pretty nigh as I'm tellin' you, and when I was out on the ground there warn't a sign of any person. There 'adn't been the time for anyone to get away, let alone a hold chap, and I made sure he warn't crouching down by the well, nor nothink. Next thing I hear master cry out somethink 'orrible, and hall I see was him hanging out by the rope, and, as master says, 'owever I got him up I couldn't tell you.'

'You hear that, Gregory?' said Mr Somerton. 'Now, does any explanation of that incident strike you?'

'The whole thing is so ghastly and abnormal that I must own it puts me quite off my balance; but the thought did occur to me that possibly the— well, the person who set the trap might have come to see the success of his plan.'

'Just so, Gregory, just so. I can think of nothing else so—Abbot… . Well, I haven't much more to tell you. I spent a miserable night, Brown sitting up with me. Next day I was no better;

unable to get up; no doctor to be had; and if one had been available, I doubt if he could have done much for me. I made Brown write off to you, and spent a second terrible night. And, Gregory, of this I am sure, and I think it affected me more than the first shock, for it lasted longer: there was someone or something on the watch outside my door the whole night. I almost fancy there were two. It wasn't only the faint noises I heard from time to time all through the dark hours, but there was the smell— the hideous smell of mould. Every rag I had had on me on that first evening I had stripped off and made Brown take it away. I believe he stuffed the things into the stove in his room; and yet the smell was there, as intense as it had been in the well; and, what is more, it came from outside the door. But with the first glimmer of dawn it faded out, and the sounds ceased, too; and that convinced me that the thing or things were creatures of darkness, and could not stand the daylight; and so I was sure that if anyone could put back the stone, it or they would be powerless until someone else took it away again. I had to wait until you came to get that done. Of course, I couldn't send Brown to do it by himself, and still less could I tell anyone who belonged to the place.

'Well, there is my story; and, if you don't believe it, I can't help it. But I think you do.'

'Indeed,' said Mr Gregory, 'I can find no alternative. I *must* believe it! I saw the well and the stone myself, and had a glimpse, I thought, of the bags or something else in the hole. And, to be plain with you, Somerton, I believe my door was watched last night, too.'

'I dare say it was, Gregory; but, thank goodness, that is over. Have you, by the way, anything to tell about your visit to that dreadful place?'

'Very little,' was the answer. 'Brown and I managed easily enough to get the slab into its place, and he fixed it very firmly with the irons and wedges you had desired him to get, and we contrived to smear the surface with mud so that it looks just like the rest of the wall. One thing I did notice in the carving on the well-head, which I think must have escaped you. It was a horrid, grotesque shape— perhaps more like a toad than anything else, and there was a label by it inscribed with the two words, "Depositum custodi".' [9]

9.‘Keep that which is committed to thee.’

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This book is dedicated

to all who love a good scare.

A Note From the Editor

I have always liked the horror genre. It never ceases to amaze me how the written word can force a person to sleep with the lights on. This feeling has followed us since childhood, and still remains inside us. The Horror genre has thrived in culture for hundreds of years, and still manages to pass the test of time.

I encourage you, to read this book alone, on a rainy night. Get a blanket to keep warm during the cold. Turn all of the lights off, and then you will be prepared. Keep one thing in mind: It is only a book… It's only a book…

-Chris W.

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Tulpa

Last year I spent six months participating in what I was told was a psychological experiment. I found an ad in my local paper looking for imaginative people looking to make good money, and since it was the only ad that week that I was remotely qualified for, I gave them a call and we arranged an interview.

They told me that all I would have to do is stay in a room, alone, with sensors attached to my head to read my brain activity, and while I was there I would visualize a double of myself. They called it my "tulpa".

It seemed easy enough, and I agreed to do it as soon as they told me how much I would be paid. And the next day, I began. They brought me to a simple room and gave me a bed, then attached sensors to my head and hooked them into a little black box on the table beside me. They talked me through the process of visualizing my double again, and explained that if I got bored or restless, instead of moving around, I should visualize my double moving around, or try to interact with him, and so on. The idea was to keep him with me the entire time I was in the room.

I had trouble with it for the first few days. It was more controlled than any sort of daydreaming I'd done before. I'd imagine my double for a few minutes, and then grow distracted. But by the fourth day, I could manage to keep him "present" for the entire six hours. They told me I was doing very well.

The second week, they gave me a different room, with wall-mounted speakers. They told me they wanted to see if I could still keep the tulpa with me in spite of distracting stimuli. The music was discordant, ugly and unsettling, and it made the process a little more difficult, but I managed nonetheless. The next week they

played even more unsettling music, punctuated with shrieks, feedback loops, what sounded like an old school modem dialing up, and guttural voices speaking some foreign language. I just laughed it off - I was a pro by then.

After about a month, I started to get bored. To liven things up, I started interacting with my doppelganger. We'd have conversations, or play rock-paper-scissors, or I'd imagine him juggling, or break-dancing, or whatever caught my fancy. I asked the researchers if my foolishness would adversely affect their study, but they encouraged me.

So we played, and communicated, and that was fun for a while. And then it got a little strange. I was telling him about my first date one day, and he corrected me. I'd said my date was wearing a yellow top, and he told me it was a green one. I thought about it for a second, and realized he was right. It creeped me out, and after my shift that day, I talked to the researchers about it. "You're using the thought-form to access your subconscious," they explained. "You knew on some level that you were wrong, and you subconsciously corrected yourself."

What had been creepy was suddenly cool. I was talking to my subconscious! It took some practice, but I found that I could question my tulpa and access all sorts of memories. I could make it quote whole pages of books I'd read once, years before, or things I was taught and immediately forgot in high school. It was awesome.

That was around the time I started "calling up" my double outside of the research center. Not often at first, but I was so used to imagining him by now that it almost seemed odd to not see him. So whenever I was bored, I'd visualize my double. Eventually I started doing it almost all the time. It was amusing to take him along like an invisible friend. I

imagined him when I was hanging out with friends, or visiting my mom; I even brought him along on a date once. I didn't need to speak aloud to him, so I was able to carry out conversations with him and no one was the wiser.

I know that sounds strange, but it was fun. Not only was he a walking repository of everything I knew and everything I had forgotten, he also seemed more in touch with me than I did at times. He had an uncanny grasp of the minutiae of body language that I didn't even realize I was picking up on. For example, I'd thought the date I brought him along on was going badly, but he pointed out how she was laughing a little too hard at my jokes, and leaning towards me as I spoke, and a bunch of other subtle clues I wasn't consciously picking up on. I listened, and let's just say that that date went very well.

By the time I'd been at the research center for four months, he was with my constantly. The researchers approached me one day after my shift, and asked me if I'd stopped visualizing him. I denied it, and they seemed pleased. I silently asked my double if he knew what prompted that, but he just shrugged it off. So did I.

I withdrew a little from the world at that point. I was having trouble relating to people. It seemed to me that they were so confused and unsure of themselves, while I had a manifestation of myself to confer with. It made socializing awkward. Nobody else seemed aware of the reasons behind their actions, why some things made them mad and others made them laugh. They didn't know what moved them. But I did - or at least, I could ask myself and get an answer.

A friend confronted me one evening. He pounded at the door until I answered it, and came in fuming and swearing up a storm. "You haven't answered when I called you in fucking weeks, you dick!" He

yelled. "What's your fucking problem?”

I was about to apologize to him, and probably would have offered to hit the bars with him that night, but my tulpa grew suddenly furious. "Hit him," it said, and before I knew what I was doing, I had. I heard his nose break. He fell to the floor and came up swinging, and we beat each other up and down my apartment.

I was more furious then than I have ever been, and I was not merciful. I knocked him to the ground and gave him two savage kicks to the ribs, and that was when he fled, hunched over and sobbing.

The police were by a few minutes later, but I told them that he had been the instigator, and since he wasn't around to refute me, they let me off with a warning. My tulpa was grinning the entire time. We spent the night crowing about my victory and sneering over how badly I'd beaten my friend.

It wasn't until the next morning, when I was checking out my black eye and cut lip in the mirror, that I remembered what had set me off. My double was the one who'd grown furious, not me. I'd been feeling guilty and a little ashamed, but he'd goaded me into a vicious fight with a concerned friend. He was present, of course, and knew my thoughts. "You don't need him anymore. You don't need anyone else," he told me, and I felt my skin crawl.

I explained all this to the researchers who employed me, but they just laughed it off. "You can't be scared of something that you're imagining," one told me. My double stood beside him, and nodded his head, then smirked at me.

I tried to take their words to heart, but over the next few days I found myself growing more and more anxious around my tulpa, and it seemed that he was changing. He looked taller, and more menacing. His eyes twinkled with mischief,

and I saw malice in his constant smile. No job was worth losing my mind over, I decided. If he were out of control, I'd put him down. I was so used to him at that point that visualizing him was an automatic process, so I started trying my damnedest to not visualize him. It took a few days, but it started to work somewhat. I could get rid of him for hours at a time. But every time he came back, he seemed worse. His skin seemed ashen, his teeth more pointed. He hissed and gibbered and threatened and swore. The discordant music I'd been listening to for months seemed to accompany him everywhere. Even when I was at home - I'd relax and slip up, no longer concentrating on not seeing him, and there he'd be, and that howling noise with him.

I was still visiting the research center and spending my six hours there. I needed the money, and I thought they weren't aware that I was now actively not visualizing my tulpa. I was wrong. After my shift one day, about five and a half months in, two impressively men grabbed and restrained me, and someone in a lab coat jabbed a hypodermic needle into me.

I woke up from my stupor back in the room, strapped into the bed, music blaring, with my doppelganger standing over me cackling. He hardly looked human anymore. His features were twisted. His eyes were sunken in their sockets and filmed over like a corpse's. He was much taller than me, but hunched over. His hands were twisted, and the fingernails were like talons. He was, in short, fucking terrifying. I tried to will him away, but I just couldn't seem to concentrate. He giggled, and tapped the IV in my arm. I thrashed in my restraints as best I could, but could hardly move at all.

"They're pumping you full of the good shit, I think. How's the mind? All fuzzy?" He leaned closer and closer as he spoke. I gagged; his breath smelt like spoiled meat. I

tried to focus, but couldn't banish him.

The next few weeks were terrible. Every so often, someone in a doctor's coat would come in and inject me with something, or force-feed me a pill. They kept me dizzy and unfocused, and sometimes left me hallucinating or delusional. My thoughtform was still present, constantly mocking. He interacted with, or perhaps caused, my delusions. I hallucinated that my mother was there, scolding me, and then he cut her throat and her blood showered me. It was so real that I could taste it.

The doctors never spoke to me. I begged at times, screamed, hurled invectives, demanded answers. They never spoke to me. They may have talked to my tulpa, my personal monster. I'm not sure. I was so doped and confused that it may have just been more delusion, but I remember them talking with him. I grew convinced that he was the real one, and I was the thoughtform. He encouraged that line of thought at times, mocked me at others.

Another thing that I pray was a delusion: he could touch me. More than that, he could hurt me. He'd poke and prod at me if he felt I wasn't paying enough attention to him. Once he grabbed my testicles and squeezed until I told him I loved him. Another time, he slashed my forearm with one of his talons. I still have a scar - most days I can convince myself that I injured myself, and just hallucinated that he was responsible. Most days.

Then one day, while he was telling me a story about how he was going to gut everyone I loved, starting with my sister, he paused. A querulous look crossed his face, and reached out and touched my head. Like my mother used to when I was feverish. He stayed still for a long moment, and then smiled. "All thoughts are creative," he told me. Then he walked out the door.

Three hours later, I was given an injection, and passed out. I awoke unrestrained. Shaking, I made my way to the door and found it unlocked. I walked out into the empty hallway, and then ran. I stumbled more than once, but I made it down the stairs and out into the lot behind the building. There, I collapsed, weeping like a child. I knew I had to keep moving, but I couldn't manage it.

I got home eventually - I don't remember how. I locked the door, and shoved a dresser against it, took a long shower, and slept for a day and a half. Nobody came for me in the night, and nobody came the next day, or the one after that. It was over. I'd spent a week locked in that room, but it had felt like a century. I'd withdrawn so much from my life beforehand that nobody had even known I was missing.

The police didn't find anything. The research center was empty when they searched it. The paper trail fell apart. The names I'd given them were aliases. Even the money I'd received was apparently untraceable.

I recovered as much as one can. I don't leave the house much, and I have panic attacks when I do. I cry a lot. I don't sleep much, and my nightmares are terrible. It's over, I tell myself. I survived. I use the concentration those bastards taught me to convince myself. It works, sometimes.

Not today, though. Three days ago, I got a phone call from my mother. There's been a tragedy. My sister's the latest victim in a spree of killings, the police say. The perpetrator mugs his victims, and then guts them.

The funeral was this afternoon. It was as lovely a service as a funeral can be, I suppose. I was a little distracted, though. All I could hear was music coming from somewhere distant. Discordant, unsettling stuff, that sounds like feedback, and shrieking, and a

modem dialing up. I hear it still - a little louder now.

Self Preservation

If you're reading this, then I am hopefully long gone. It's been… two months now since the meteor struck Mississippi. There was a lot of public interest in it, astrologers and the like all gathering around for a look. They took samples of the rock and shipped them all over the world to museums in every country. Hell, I almost made a trip to have a look myself, but I had an interview with a potential employer. If he hadn't called me up the previous day, I'd be dead now. Three days later, after the initial hype died down, the news reported nothing on the meteor for a couple of days.

The next thing I heard about it was when I got home from the pub and turned on the late-night news. I was just in time to catch a breaking news article. The worried-looking reporter informed me that almost everyone who had been in the vicinity of Mississippi when the meteor went down had been hospitalized. Their symptoms were similar to those that a corpse experiences during decomposition. Ten people had already died, mostly the elderly and the very young. Scientists and geneticists from all over the globe were working frantically to try and find a cure. Being smarter than the average bear, I gathered some supplies and prepared for an epidemic. Years of being paranoid beyond reason were finally about to pay off.

The news the next day had a lighter tone. A Chinese scientist had worked out that the meteor had contained an alien strain of bacteria that slowly broke down flesh tissue. The scientist also remarked that the bacteria were only affecting humans. He had also worked out that if a victim consumed a living being, such as an insect, it would delay the progression of the bacteria, giving the scientists more time to figure

out a permanent cure. Anyone who thought they might have contracted the infection was to eat as many live creatures as they could. The reporter also explained that the US Army was attempting to contain the infection.

They failed.

Anyone who has read Stephen King's book, The Stand, will have an idea of how the bacteria made its way around the world. It passed through the air, but to catch it, you had to be near someone infected. Because the symptoms took between three to five days to kick in, people didn't realize that they were infected. In a week, Victus Somes Disease, as it had been named, was global.

I had barricaded myself in my house, with towels and blankets stuffed into every crack. I had the TV tuned to the news all day and night. The scientists had not predicted that the bacteria would adapt to the infected people's efforts at trying to keep it at bay. Victims all over the world were claiming that the insects were no longer working. People were starting to catch small mammals and eat them.

As the days went by, people were slowly eating larger and larger animals. The first reported case of cannibalism was, ironically, the last broadcast made. The anchorman's hair was falling out and he was missing three teeth. He nervously told America that there had been a reported case of cannibalism in Southern Europe. He also said that there would be no further broadcasts. All survivors were to lock themselves in their house and not let anyone in.

For the next week and a half, I watched the infected shamble up the street, knocking on doors. One of my neighbors, a couple of houses down from me, was stupid enough to open the door. Three people dragged him out and started biting his flesh. They started with his arms and legs, trying to keep him alive

for as long as possible. They were crying as they ate. Their meal was shrieking in pain, and the three people eating him were apologizing furiously through mouthfuls of his arm. I don't think they were unable to control themselves; it looked more like they were disgusted by what they had to do to stay alive.

They tried to break into my house five or six days later, but my barricades held. They were outside, begging me to let them in. "Just one bite. Please, be generous." I listened to their pleading all night, too scared to sleep.

I suppose I should explain why I'm writing this. I'm infected. Yesterday I coughed and lost a canine. I spent the night pulling out my teeth, easing them out one by one. It didn't hurt; they just slid out, like pulling up carrots. Anyway, as I was saying, I'm infected. The bugs have stopped working, and all the wild animals have long since run away. I have decided to lure someone into my house and attack them. It sounds so wrong writing that out, but I don't want to die. And I'm so hungry.

I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.

Teddy

My sister had a teddy bear, a scary teddy bear. I do not know why, but it creeped me out. It was just so disturbing to me. The thing had eyes that looked so real. It was as if it was made from a real bear and its face was just blank and unsettling.

I first started to get weird feelings about the bear when my sister first got it, she was only a baby at the time, and I was about 4. We had a dog, you see, and he had a habit of eating things so my mother always had to put it up on the small cabinet in the corner of the hallway upstairs. Every time I went up those stairs, I saw that creepy bear suddenly glare around the corner at me, as if it was watching me. This wasn't the weird

part; it started to get really weird about 5 years later: at the age of 6-7 my sister had lost interest in the bear so my mother just threw it in the old toy cupboard, the only problem was that the cupboard was in my room.

When I was 9, old enough to stay on my own and go to bed without any assistance, every night I would get into my bed at night and turn my lamp off. This is when it got scary. As I was getting some sleep, I suddenly remembered Mum putting that teddy in the cupboard; I slowly turned to look over across my room to see it through the glass. My heart suddenly stopped as I thought about the horrors the plush had caused me, but at the age of 9, I wanted to grow up and lose my fears so I just shook it off and put my head on the pillow.

When I got up to pull my sheets on a bit further, I noticed something that would scar me for life: there sat, at the end of my bedroom, the teddy. My heart started beating normally again. I sat there staring at it for about a minute. When I needed to yawn, I closed my eyes. I opened them to see the teddy sitting closer to my bed. At this point, I was really freaked out. I started to move back to the wall and looked around to see if there was any sign that anyone had come in. When I looked back to see the teddy on the end of my bed, I was so startled that I almost fainted from fear. When I blinked, it had gone. I looked around. To my relief, I saw no sign of it.

I sat my head back down on my pillow hoping for some sleep. Then I opened my eyes. It was above my head, staring straight down. I screamed as it lunged down at me. I will never see a bear the same way again. A few years later, after years of horror, I burned it; I sat in enjoyment as the bear was turned to smoking ashes in my fireplace.

I have lived my teenage life through adolescence; the only thing

I could remember that was in any way similar to my bad experience was when I watched Trainspotting. That fucking baby scene shocked me so badly but other than that, all was well.

When I turned 19, I was about to move into my new home. I had been given the keys to the house and was ready to set up my furniture. After hours of carrying, I carried the final box from the removal truck into the front door and shut it behind me. I turned to go into the kitchen and put it on the table. I opened it to see a cabinet. I took it out, walked into my new living room and placed it in the corner, stared at it and thought to myself, I don't remember packing this cabinet. I didn't really care that much as I had just moved into my new home.

I walked back into the kitchen to grab my television and brought it into the living room when I saw it. The teddy, it just sat there, staring at me with those realistic blank eyes. It was beyond imagination, like something from a horror movie. My fears could not be contained and whatever that bear or demon possessing it was, it knew I was scared. I threw it in the garbage and put a cinder block over the lid as I slept in my bed that night, content and feeling a little more secure. I woke up that night and checked the time. 12:00.

I heard a sound in the kitchen. I walked there, and noticed that the outside door was wide open. Muddy paw tracks lead into the kitchen. I saw that one of my knives was gone from the holder and then I heard something creeping behind me. I hightailed to my car and drove. I looked in the rear view mirror and saw its face. It was holding a knife. I slammed the brakes. It flew through the front windshield, stood up, and stared right into my eyes. I felt as if it was pulling me towards it. The only thing that would be coming towards it would be my *two front wheels*. I rammed into, it felt a slight bump,

sighed in relief, and drove. Not even a minute after, I felt as if something was cutting at the bottom of my car, then my car grinded to a halt. I went out to check it: there was a slash through my fuel tank. I ran for dear life to the nearest hotel to stay at. The only one was a mile away. I ran with every few feet it was just one foot behind. Once I got to the hotel, I fell on the bed with exhaustion. When I woke up...

It was at the end of the bed…

The art of Jacob Emory

Ghost stories? Nah, we don't have anything like that around here. We DO have the story of Jacob, but that's about as close as you'll get.

…You really want to know? Well, I'm not supposed to tell you, but all right, just no interrupting. I don't have the patience for it.

How to describe Jacob Emory… well, I guess you could say he was the kind of guy you could never take notice of. This isn't to say he was a bad kid, in any sense- many people in this town thought he was the most reliable person for an odd job in the state- but he never really excelled in anything. He was the living proof behind the statement, "jack of all trades, and ace of none." Most of this was due to his lack of will. He dabbled in damn near everything this town could offer him, automobiles, radio operation, store management, what have you, but he never stuck with anything. His friends and workers went after him about it a number of times, but everybody got the same unsatisfying response: "It just wasn't enough." Needless to say, any friends he kept were either very patient or never spoke of the matter altogether.

It was probably inevitable, and then, that Jacob would leave to go abroad. I don't remember where he went, but I think Gertrude down the street knew before she passed on- you'll have to scout someone else

if you ever get curious. In any case, no one even tried to stop him. Everybody thought that a little travel would stamp the ambition out of him, or else feed it until it was no longer an issue. Hell, we even gave him a sending-off party, which I thought was pretty nice of everybody.

So anyway, he was gone for… six, seven years? Can't remember. You'll have to check with someone else about that, too. Anyways, he came back, eventually, and he had changed, obviously enough. He was amiable, energetic; all smiles all the time, and we all quickly learned why. He showed us a souvenir he'd brought back- a solid black stick, the length of a pencil but the texture of chalk. We all wondered why on earth such a simple thing would prompt such a spring in his step, until he gave his demonstration. He took a piece of paper, and with this stick- God, there's got to be a better word for it- with this stick, he… he drew a crude circle.

It dropped, and rested on the border of the paper, like a stone. It didn't leave the paper, but it acted out on it, sort of like an old movie projector on a screen.

Son, I know how crazy that sounds, and if you feel like playing skeptic, then you can leave an old man to his craziness, but I know what I saw, even if everyone's been hushing it up, and that stone he drew dropped. Jake even passed around the paper, and as it was being passed, it rolled around as the paper got tilted. None of us had any words for it- Hell, what was there to say? - But he continued drawing demonstration after demonstration for us, stick figures in various pageants and plays doing everything from fighting each other to making perfect "human" pyramids, and we all thought it was incredible. That was all the go-ahead he needed- he announced that he planned to put on shows to pay for rent and food, where he would draw anything the crowd members wanted. THAT we

talked to some length about, and he eventually convinced us that it would be safe, his drawings ethical, the practice lucrative and unique, and the attention would not go anywhere outside of the town's borders.

Poor Jacob. If I'd not been so swept up in the moment, I might've read the signs right then and there, and saved the sorry son of a bitch by snapping the terrible thing in half. But I was younger, we all were, and we saw no problem with encouraging him with what we all saw as an incredible experience to be shared with everyone else. Now, he didn't have any big radio or television connections, mind you, and the Internet wouldn't come around for another decade, so he did what all people on a shoestring budget do- he advertised his show with fliers. Fliers might not mean anything to you city-folk, but in a small town, they gain a fair glance-over from time to time, and what's more, Jacob's managed to stick out by having little figures jump up and down and whatnot to get people's attention. His first show must've gotten nearly sixty or so people, probably a lot more than that.

And his shows were fantastic. Someone would shout out a scene from a play or a comedy sketch, and Jake's hand would fly over a white wall like a bird. He'd been holding back when he made that stone, that's for damn sure. His illustrations were all spot-on, and he could make an incredible human figure in minutes. Come to think of it, I don't remember any of his scenes lasting more than ten minutes to make. They were all really well-done scenes, too- not only could you see a knight charge a castle, Jake would draw the castle's interior as well, like a wedding cake split down the middle, so you could see the knight scale the walls, fight his way through levels to the dungeon, fight back out with the princess, and make a leaping jump off castle parapets onto his getaway horse all in

complete silence. Not realistic, no, but that was part of the appeal- none of us went in there expecting something real. When a scene or a sketch was finished, either the characters would leave off a wall or he'd cover the wall with white paint. This was good, in a way- it gave these shows a time limit, so that when he'd finished with all of the four walls in the room, everyone knew the show was over until the paint dried.

Jake, meanwhile, was changing in a bad way. I'd mentioned that upon his return, he'd been extremely energetic. Well, that energy, that vitality or fervor or whatever you want to call it, it never left him. Not for an instant. Far from it, it seemed to grow in him, and he enjoyed it all too much. His eyes grew wider, he slept gradually less over time, his statements and opinions more radical and frenzied, and though he never was a pushover, he was starting to make people nervous in his company.

A month or two passed, and Jake's audience grew like a wildfire. Nearly everyone in the town paid to see Jake's art in action, and he had to rent out larger and larger places for them to sit. He now didn't stop after one scene was done- he moved directly on to the next, put on the next blank space on the wall, sometimes to the intriguing effect of causing scenes to mingle, which the crowd loved. The subject matter got more wild and immoral, the monsters got more bizarre and creative, the fighters using more impossible weaponry, all for the sake of the crowd's interests. Jake got steadily more indulgent, which we figured was from the money, and he became a drinker and a womanizer (neither of which got rid of that vitality, by the way.) Some of those women claimed that they'd woken up in the middle of the night to see him scribbling with that stick on a drawing pad, a gigantic grin on his face, and while most of them said that they'd assumed he

was drawing them in the nude, there's rumors that one or two of them got glances at that notepad. Those anonymous few supposedly said that those drawings absolutely weren't nude pictures, but neither of them, whoever they are, will say what he was drawing. Don't bother looking for the notepads or fliers, though; they're all gone now. I'm getting off-track; point is, he was hitting the bottle, and that's important, because it was that drinking that would eventually ruin everything.

On the night of one of his performances, as he walked in front of his cheering crowd, it was immediately apparent to everybody that he was completely drunk. I was in the front row, and I could smell the bourbon on him from ten feet away. The show started, he went through a bunch of sketches and scenarios the crowd recommended, when at the end someone asked that he draw himself. Everyone cheered the idea, I guessed they'd been wondering what his creations thought of him, and he eventually obliged.

No sooner had Jake finished connecting the final two lines on his coat, than every single character, across the vast, expansive wall, all stopped and looked directly at that illustration. Lovers stopped kissing, clowns stopped laughing, robots stopped fighting pirates, everything stopped and looked at the Jacob-illustration. The crowd died almost instantly- I remember Jake's face at that moment, pale white, full of terrible comprehension at his mistake, and looking desperately for the cans of white paint he'd forgotten to put out before the show. Everyone else? They were looking at the fake Jacob.

That Jacob reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a black stick of his own, and as we all watched, drew a door. He pushed on his side and the door swung open,

allowing him to walk through onto the floor of the auditorium.

The rest was an absolute hellish pandemonium. People screamed and ran for the exits as Jacob's characters, both those currently on the wall and those which had previously left before being covered up, ran out of their own exit, throwing pies, shooting lasers, blowing fire and poison and the impossible. I was near enough the exit to escape, and gave only one backwards glance. The scene will haunt me forever.

Jacob Emory was being dragged by his creations, kicking and screaming, through the door his copy had made.

The auditorium burned down, obviously enough, but I have no idea how many characters escaped, what happened to the fake Emory, or how many people died. The fire brought the fire department from the nearest cities up to over a hundred miles away- they in turn brought the police force, which brought the government, which hushed up everything. They took the fliers and any art Jake had made, and swore everyone to secrecy or else life detainment. The fire was blamed on a cigarette in the garbage during a basketball game, and we all eventually went on with our lives. Jacob was made to never have existed.

In retrospect, I realize everything. Jacob hadn't been creating illustrations. Illustrations don't move, much less act or attack-they're just images people see, shadows made to look like real things. Jacob had been making life- actual thinking things in some alternate dimension, using a power that was never meant to fall to mortal hands. He got drunk on his power. His punishment was probably well deserved.

Incidentally, the government screwed up on two different accounts. They did a damn good job silencing everyone, but proof remains. The ruins are still there,

you know, the auditorium's ruins. I hear they're going to start reconstruction soon, which will wipe out any remaining evidence someone can definitely see, but I went back there once, several years after the fire- just once. Amidst the rubble, covered in ash, I saw something squirming. I looked closer. It was Jacob Emory's hand on the wall. Exactly like it had been three years ago, (sweaty but calloused, I remember,) but it was constantly flailing, as if the body it was supposed to be attached to, was still writhing in flames.

That was mistake number one. Number two was those creations.

Like I said, I don't know how many escaped, nor how many the government agents found and caught, but I will say only this- Those tall grass meadows on the outskirts of town? Don't go into them. Ever. You were asking about those white figures you've seen at night, right?

This town doesn't have ghost stories.

Mr. Widemouth

During my childhood my family was like a drop of water in a vast river, never remaining in one location for long. We settled in Rhode Island when I was eight, and there we remained until I went to college in Colorado Springs. Most of my memories are rooted in Rhode Island, but there are fragments in the attic of my brain, which belong to the various homes we had lived in when I was much younger.

Most of these memories are unclear and pointless — chasing after another boy in the back yard of a house in North Carolina, trying to build a raft to float on the creek behind the apartment we rented in Pennsylvania, and so on. But there is one set of memories, which remains as clear as glass, as though they were just made yesterday. I often wonder whether these memories are simply lucid

dreams produced by the long sickness I experienced that spring, but in my heart, I know they are real.

We were living in a house just outside the bustling metropolis of New Vineyard, Maine, and population 643. It was a large structure, especially for a family of three. There were a number of rooms that I didn't see in the five months we resided there. In some ways it was a waste of space, but it was the only house on the market at the time, at least within an hour's commute to my father's place of work.

The day after my fifth birthday (attended by my parents alone), I came down with a fever. The doctor said I had mononucleosis, which meant no rough play and more fever for at least another three weeks. It was horrible timing to be bed-ridden— we were in the process of packing our things to move to Pennsylvania, and most of my things were already packed away in boxes, leaving my room barren. My mother brought me ginger ale and books several times a day, and these served the function of being my primary form of entertainment for the next few weeks. Boredom always loomed just around the corner, waiting to rear its ugly head and compound my misery.

I don't exactly recall how I met Mr. Widemouth. I think it was about a week after I was diagnosed with mono. My first memory of the small creature was asking him if he had a name. He told me to call him Mr. Widemouth, because his mouth was large. In fact, everything about him was large in comparison to his body— his head, his eyes, and his crooked ears— but his mouth was by far the largest.

"You look kind of like a Furby," I said as he flipped through one of my books.

Mr. Widemouth stopped and gave me a puzzled look. "Furby? What's a Furby?" he asked.

I shrugged. “You know… the toy; the little robot with the big ears. You can pet and feed them, almost like a real pet.”

“Oh.” Mr. Widemouth resumed his activity. “You don’t need one of those. They aren’t the same as having a real friend.”

I remember Mr. Widemouth disappearing every time my mother stopped by to check in on me. “I lay under your bed,” he later explained. “I don’t want your parents to see me because I’m afraid they won’t let us play anymore.”

We didn’t do much during those first few days. Mr. Widemouth just looked at my books, fascinated by the stories and pictures they contained. The third or fourth morning after I met him, he greeted me with a large smile on his face. “I have a new game we can play,” he said. “We have to wait until after your mother comes to check on you, because she can’t see us play it. It’s a secret game.”

After my mother delivered more books and soda at the usual time, Mr. Widemouth slipped out from under the bed and tugged my hand. “We have to go the room at the end of this hallway,” he said. I objected at first, as my parents had forbidden me to leave my bed without their permission, but Mr. Widemouth persisted until I gave in.

The room in question had no furniture or wallpaper. Its only distinguishing feature was a window opposite the doorway. Mr. Widemouth darted across the room and gave the window a firm push, flinging it open. He then beckoned me to look out at the ground below.

We were on the second story of the house, but it was on a hill, and from this angle the drop was farther than two stories due to the incline. “I like to play pretend up here,” Mr. Widemouth explained. “I pretend that there is a big, soft trampoline below this window, and I jump. If you pretend hard enough

you bounce back up like a feather. I want you to try."

I was a five-year-old with a fever, so only a hint of skepticism darted through my thoughts as I looked down and considered the possibility. "It's a long drop," I said.

"But that's all a part of the fun. It wouldn't be fun if it were only a short drop. If it were that way you may as well just bounce on a real trampoline."

I toyed with the idea, picturing myself falling through thin air only to bounce back to the window on something unseen by human eyes. But the realist in me prevailed. "Maybe some other time," I said. "I don't know if I have enough imagination. I could get hurt."

Mr. Widemouth's face contorted into a snarl, but only for a moment. Anger gave way to disappointment. "If you say so," he said. He spent the rest of the day under my bed, quiet as a mouse.

The following morning Mr. Widemouth arrived holding a small box. "I want to teach you how to juggle," he said. "Here are some things you can use to practice, before I start giving you lessons."

I looked in the box. It was full of knives. "My parents will kill me!" I shouted, horrified that Mr. Widemouth had brought knives into my room— objects that my parents would never allow me to touch. "I'll be spanked and grounded for a year!"

Mr. Widemouth frowned. "It's fun to juggle with these. I want you to try it."

I pushed the box away. "I can't. I'll get in trouble. Knives aren't safe to just throw in the air."

Mr. Widemouth's frown deepened into a scowl. He took the box of knives and slid under my bed, remaining there the rest of the day. I began to wonder how often he was under me.

I started having trouble sleeping after that. Mr. Widemouth often woke me up at night, saying he put a real trampoline under the window, a big one, one that I couldn't see in the dark. I always declined and tried to go back to sleep, but Mr. Widemouth persisted. Sometimes he stayed by my side until early in the morning, encouraging me to jump.

He wasn't so fun to play with anymore.

My mother came to me one morning and told me I had her permission to walk around outside. She thought the fresh air would be good for me, especially after being confined to my room for so long. Ecstatic, I put on my sneakers and trotted out to the back porch, yearning for the feeling of sun on my face.

Mr. Widemouth was waiting for me. "I have something I want you to see," he said. I must have given him a weird look, because he then said, "It's safe, I promise."

I followed him to the beginning of a deer trail, which ran through the woods behind the house. "This is an important path," he explained. "I've had a lot of friends about your age. When they were ready, I took them down this path, to a special place. You aren't ready yet, but one day, I hope to take you there."

I returned to the house, wondering what kind of place lay beyond that trail.

Two weeks after I met Mr. Widemouth, the last load of our things had been packed into a moving truck. I would be in the cab of that truck, sitting next to my father for the long drive to Pennsylvania. I considered telling Mr. Widemouth that I would be leaving, but even at five years old, I was beginning to suspect that perhaps the creature's intentions were not to my benefit, despite what he said otherwise. For this reason, I decided to keep my departure a secret.

My father and I were in the truck at 4 a.m. He was hoping to make it to Pennsylvania by lunchtime tomorrow with the help of an endless supply of coffee and a six-pack of energy drinks. He seemed more like a man who was about to run a marathon rather than one who was about to spend two days sitting still.

"Early enough for you," my father asked with a hint of sympathy?

I nodded and placed my head against the window, hoping for some sleep before the sun came up. I felt my father's hand on my shoulder. "This is the last move, son, I promise. I know it's hard for you, as sick as you've been. Once daddy gets promoted we can settle down and you can make friends."

I opened my eyes as we backed out of the driveway. I saw Mr. Widemouth's silhouette in my bedroom window. He stood motionless until the truck was about to turn onto the main road. He gave a pitiful little wave good-bye, steak knife in hand. I didn't wave back.

Years later, I returned to New Vineyard. The piece of land our house stood upon was empty except for the foundation, as the house burned down a few years after my family left. Out of curiosity, I followed the deer trail that Mr. Widemouth had shown me. Part of me expected him to jump out from behind a tree and scare the living bejeesus out of me, but I felt that Mr. Widemouth was gone, somehow tied to the house that no longer existed.

The trail ended at the New Vineyard Memorial Cemetery.

I noticed that many of the tombstones belonged to children.

The Couch

Ok, disclaimer: To the very best of my knowledge, this story is true. I don't expect to convince you - truth be told, I've had a

hard time coming to terms with it myself. Cliché' as it may be, I really am a rational person, and, if not for this, I would probably be the most stone-faced atheist you'd ever meet. But, after much internal struggle and debate, I have come to the conclusion that there are things in life that simply can't be explained with reason, at least in the form in which we know it. Logic, for all the trust we place in it, is really nothing more than a candle, all too easily snuffed out. And when it is gone, we are left alone in the dark, and everything we would scoff at by daylight suddenly becomes very believable.

All right, before I wax too melodramatic, here's my story.

I was very young; only 4 or 5, at most, before either of my siblings were born. It was just Mommy and Daddy and I, living in our little house in Great Bend, Kansas. It was very quaint. We were a young family, without much money, and most of our furniture was second-hand.

It was the middle of the day. The summer, hot, boring. I was playing marbles by myself on the thin carpet beside the huge, old, flower-patterned-couch. Mom was down the hall in the kitchen, and Dad was at work.

Why I was trying to roll marbles around on the carpet I don't know - we had a perfectly good linoleum floor, after all. But there I was, swishing the marbles back and forth, happily bouncing them into each other. Then, in my overzealous enthusiasm, I rolled too hard. My favorite marble - the clear, ruby-red one, zipped into the dark space under the couch and was lost.

Damnit. Dad wasn't home, and he was the only one strong enough to move that huge old couch for me. I'd have to get my marble back myself.

I reached my hand under the couch, tentatively at first, then

deeper. Encountering no marbles, I pulled my hand out in disappointment.

Then, a hand reached out from under the couch back at me.

I remember the image vividly, and I suspect I always will. It was a slim hand, with tapered fingers - a woman's hand. It was gnarled and wrinkled, as if aged, and it was dead black. Not black as in African, black as in dead. Of course, back then; I didn't know that corpses blacken as they decompose, so I didn't know what the black meant.

The hand reached out to me as far as it could, which was just up to the wrist. Then it retreated under the couch. Then it emerged again, this time pushing with it a little crumpled up, plastic bag with a logo on it I didn't recognize. It waited, as if expecting me to take the bag. Then, when I didn't, it pulled the bag back under the couch and was gone.

I got up, walked down to the kitchen, and told my Mommy what had happened.

Why didn't I run screaming, or at least run? I don't really know. All I can say is, I was a little kid; a hand reaching out from under the couch at me didn't seem like that huge a deal. I hadn't yet learned what was and was not permissible in reality. I had no worldview.

Mom was skeptical, but walked me back to the couch and explained how I was probably imagining things. She even reached her hand under the couch to convince me that nothing was down there. Later, Dad lifted the couch up for me, and the only thing under it was, of course, my missing marble, plus a few more marbles I didn't even remember losing.

But here's the scary part...

For years, I remembered this - I even developed a weird fantasy of little hand-people living under the

couch, and I, in my childlike innocence, believed that they would catch me and take me away if I ever reached into their domain again. Then, as I grew older, I wrote the memory off as a dream I had had as a child - cute, but silly.

Then, a few years ago, I recounted the story to my mother.

She gave me a funny look, and told me she remembered it, because, after all, she had been there. She told me that she remembered me coming to her in the middle of the day and telling her about the hand under the couch, and remembered being highly disturbed by my story, since I was an extremely quiet, well-behaved kid who didn't ever lie.

Then she told me about the couch itself. According to her, she and Dad had gotten the couch from the estate of an old woman who had actually died on it. This was the first time I had heard about this, but it sure explained why they got rid of the couch within a month of my story.

But here's part that truly frightens me, even to this day. The part that I have to try so hard to get out of my mind some nights still haunts me. Remember that bag the hand pushed towards me? I've never forgotten the logo that was on it. And, recently, (as in a few years ago), I saw the same logo again, on what looked like the same type of bag, in a hardware store.

It was a bag of utility razor blades.

They Come

There's no doubt about it: We fear rain. We wear our trench coats, and our umbrellas, and all that, to avoid getting hit by some lousy droplets of water.

But what is it that makes us fear it? It's not something we learn, it's something deep, which resonates within us.

An inexplicable repulsion towards getting ourselves wet during a downpour. It is not a learnt fear. It's instinctive.

Instinct; its small word for such a huge idea.

I've lived in the countryside for 4 months now, and am now back in the city.

The neighbors used to tell me to nail the windows shut for about 2 or 3 weeks right after I started living there, but it was the beginning of the summer, and with all the heat of the sun, I wasn't going to do something as stupid as that. At least, I thought it was stupid.

You know that smell, the one that rises just before the rain starts falling on you? In the city, people will always say it's the smell of watered earth. Of the dirt getting wet. Of bacteria, and plants receiving the rain. But the people have never been in the country, and they haven't the faintest idea. You see, the cities, the huge metropolis has not always been there. Mankind has been living in nature far more than it has been living in the cities. That is why we still have the instinct to fear the rain.

It is not the smell of earth, dirt, bacteria, plants... it's their smell. They come out in the rain, and they seek to mate.

But they cannot hold their own, for they must retreat hastily, as soon as the rains give in, and the water stops.

I didn't nail my windows shut, and as soon as the rain came, I started hearing it. Have you ever heard the tiny, almost unnoticeable hum or high pitch that TVs make when they are turned on? Have you ever felt a pressure on your chest when a low-pitched beat is heard? Those are the things that filled the air, with that smell, and those high and low thumping moans.

It's the smell they follow. I came home a bit wet, for the rain started on my way home. I started hearing those noises, some time after I entered my house. Then the scratching on my door began. I went to check it through the window, and what I saw was horrible. What at first looked like a giant worm was in fact a humanoid thing, with it's lower body being one long leg or tail. Its small, atrophied arms were strong enough to allow them to crawl, slither. And its face, it looked like it had been petrified, the only thing that looked like it was in use was its nose. It moved. And as soon as I got close to the window, it's face shifted towards me. The window was slightly open, and now I know it turned because it could smell me.

It moved towards the window, but it wasn't strong enough to pull itself up inside, and I had enough time to close the window. Soon enough, it turned, trying to sense the smell. My odor. And after a while, more came. From the hills came an entire legion of those things, 300, 400, maybe.

Thoughts of monkeys running up, towards high rocks, and climbing trees came to my mind. These are the things we've feared since the dawn of time.

After a while, the macabre sight became something I couldn't stand. The noise was so much I couldn't sleep, and the things were so ugly and disgusting, yet I could not stop watching.

Soon, I saw the old stray dog that always wandered around. It was a dirty dog; it must have been 15 years old. He was too old to run, too old to live. They grabbed hold of his paws, one, two, three, five... The dog started howling, and tried to bite one, then the other. Soon, they overpowered the poor animal, and then... It happened. From their chests came out a sting. One, two, three, five, they all started stinging the poor beast. After that, they all turned to see towards the East. Then they

started crawling, as fast as they could, towards the plains. They disappeared as fast as they came.

The dog lay motionless. It seemed like parts of him breathed. At intervals, parts of his body pulsated. Then, suddenly, the dog jumped to his four, and looked renewed. It started running like it was a young pup. Then it went running towards the plains, and disappeared from my sight.

When morning broke, I took nails and wood planks and nailed my windows shut. Not even one hole was left. I even checked for other holes in the walls, the door. God, I was starting to get paranoid.

I left the house to get some groceries from the neighbors. They had their own farm, and had a lot of things for sale, but we're talking farms here. The distance I had to travel was about a mile or two to their house. When I got there, black menacing clouds were near. The neighbors were cold and quick; they gave me eggs, milk, some honey, and meat, but told me if I wanted to live, I should stay for the night. I remembered the last night, but I still hadn't made the connection of rain and monsters, so I declined the offer and hurried back, while the farmer, behind me, yelled I should stay if I valued my life.

The rain started midway towards my house. I was wet within the first 10 seconds of rain, and it was a real downpour.

I felt the smell of "rain" once more. And then I heard the sounds, once again. The high-pitched noise, the low thumping.

I wet my pants when I saw the first of those things crawling towards me. It's nose, lihigh-pitchedye, moving towards me.

I dropped what I was carrying, and ran for my life. Even though they crawled, they were pretty fast. I was beginning to lose my breath, when suddenly, once again; the image of monkeys climbing trees

came to me. I remembered: it could not lift itself through my window! I realized I had a small hope for surviving this, but I had some hope.

While I was running, I turned to see left and right, all I needed was something above the ground; Something that they couldn't climb up to. The farmer's barn! I could see he left his old wood ladder on the side of it. All I had to do was set it up, climb it, and then raise it so they could not follow. It was heavier than I thought, but I was truly terrified of what would happen if I didn't raise it. When I had put it in place, one of those things, faster than those of its kind, tried to stab me with his sting. I could see it like I was in slow motion. I grabbed the sting with both hands, while the thing kept trying to nail me with it. An egg came out of it, while I tried to keep it away from me. I pushed the thing to the side, and the egg fell to the ground. It started to move and pulsate, but then, it stopped. The exterior turned to stone.

As soon as that happened, I heard the clamor of those things, stronger and more penetrating than ever. I saw that the one thing, which tried to stab me, was now writhing, like it was in pain. I didn't hesitate for one minute, I felt rage within me, and so I started to kick it. Then I stomped its head in. I ran up the ladder and then I raised it towards me, up on the barn's roof.

I don't know how I managed to, but I fell asleep. The next morning, the farmer’s wife waked me, and she was yelling. She kept asking why I was there.

I put the ladder, went down, and found a little stone ball... and the skeleton of a dog, with its skull bashed in.

Why had I never seen those things until now? Why did this happen only in a place like this?

It all came to me. The "egg", the rain, the smell of wet people... what about those flashes in my mind? Those memories are of a time, long gone?

The people around here, the environment around here, it's all very much like the one it was some thousands of years ago. The only thing around here that's changed is the houses. It's the only "new" thing. And those memories of the past came to me because this thing... it's a primal fear. We have been running from the rain and water for so long, even when we were un-evolved chimps, we ran from it... and ran from the ground as well.

I left that place as quickly as I could. I only spent one more night in those plains. I heard those screams and thumps. This time, they came for my house, and my aroma alone. I had killed one of their eggs. I knew it was because of this, how else could one explain that entire ruckus that happened when the infected dog dropped the egg?

They beat on the door, they slammed their bodies against it, and they kept moaning and scratching, hitting and weeping, smelling my fear. However, the rain stopped quickly, and they ran away.

I am writing this now, because I'm scared of them. I came back to the city, but maybe I should have let them take me.

Instead, I've brought this plague with me, back to the city. They are on the other side of my door, and it's raining outside. It has been for a long time.

Because even now, even though we don't know about them...

Deep inside, we still fear them.

Oh God, the rain won't stop. It's been 3 days, and I'm beginning to lose it.

They claw the door, and I don't know how much more it will resist.

They are taking it down. They smell my fea-

Slenderman

The following is a witness's reencounter of their incident with The Slender Man

After waking up with a jolt, the girl laid in bed a few seconds longer. Reaching over to switch on her bedside lamp, she tried to remember exactly what had stolen her sweet slumber away. When she couldn’t, the brunette swung her legs over the side of the bed and heaved herself up. Checking the time on her phone, she snorted when she saw it was midnight: the witching hour. Knowing that sleep would only evade her, she left her bedroom for the kitchen, a good cup of coffee on her mind.

As she passed by her front door, a chill spread like liquid fire down her spine. It’s only winter, she told herself, focusing again on the coffee plan. Measuring out scoops, water, and preparing her cup kept her occupied, but as the dark liquid boiled, she had nothing left to keep her mind from wandering off. The chill returned and she couldn’t help but glance behind her to the front door. It stood there innocently enough, just like always. The deadbolt was still in place and she could see nothing amiss with it. Turning back to her coffee, she did her best to forget about the feeling.

With her cup in hand, she started back towards her bedroom. As she walked by the front door, she decided that a quick glance out of the peephole would help calm her restless thoughts. The chill worsened with each step she took towards the door and further away from the safety and warmth of her blankets. She pressed her empty hand against the cold, metal door and took a deep breath before leading her eye to the peephole.

At first, she could only see an inky blackness and somehow seemed to swirl in itself. When she

blinked in surprise, the void melted away. She wished it hadn't. In it's place, there stood what she could only guess was once a man. The limbs were long and inhumanly awkward, with bulky joints branching off into several arms, not unlike the branches of a tree. The creature was draped in a black suit, somehow making the thing more nightmarish to her. The icing on the proverbial cake, however, was what passed as the hellish thing's face? It was as though her mind blurred the ghastly visage to spare itself further shock and horror.

She shoved herself away from the door with the hand still pressed against it. The scalding mug of coffee fell, the liquid burning her bare legs as she fell backwards and tried to crawl away from the door. She knew, somehow, that her mind hadn't been playing tricks on her. As she crab walked away from the door, she watched as tendrils as black as the void itself snake around through the cracks. The girl was trapped between the instinct to flee and the gut feeling to not turn her back on the door. When the door jolted, the urge to flee overcame her and she slipped in the burning liquid as she tried to make it back to her room.

She knew deep down that she was trapping herself in a corner, but she had to get away from the door. The girl was halfway down the hallway when she heard the previously locked door creak open. She screamed and slipped into a wall, cracking her chin on it and stunning her.

After that, there was only blackness.-

"Nicole?" a warm, male voice snapped the woman out of her trance. As she turned around, she was met by one of her sister's doctor's. She nodded, not sure if she should say anything, or even if she could find her voice if she did have something to say. That morning, she had gotten an urgent phone call from the hospital, saying that her sister, Lindsay,

was there. Before they had even let her see her, the doctor's had pulled her off to the side and insisted that they talk to her about what might have happened. Phrases like 'self-inflected' and 'assault' had been thrown around and Nicole felt her mind reel.

She still hadn't fully understood what they had been saying until she saw Lindsay with her own eyes. Her little sister had a bandage wrapped around her head, covering both of her ears as well as her eyes. They said it was to keep her now deadened eyes from drying out and to try to keep infection out of the wounds Lindsay had made to her ears. The doctors had guessed that either she or someone else had jammed a pencil into them to keep her off balance or to deafen herself against something. There was the mix of first and second degree burns on her hands, legs, and feet, from what was assumed to be the coffee her neighbors found slipped all over the entry to her apartment.

As Nicole walked into her sister's hospital room the first time, she thought she had spied the silhouette of a man in the window. That, she knew, was impossible. Her sister's room was on the third story of the hospital.

Morgan's Corner

AUTHOR'S NOTICE: *"Many of you have most likely heard similar stories like this in the past. The reason I wrote this is because It's always been a story I've heard growing up, and I thought writing a spinoff of it would be interesting. I could have sworn it was only a local legend. I suppose that's been proven wrong. Anyway, here you go."*

My boyfriend Steven and I said our goodbyes, and we got into his car ready to leave the party. It was about 11 o'clock at night and pitch black outside—so dark you could hardly see your hand 3 inches from your face. It was rather chilly that night, for it was the beginning of spring still yet. The

wind was blowing ferociously, trees swaying, crashing their leaves into others. We were about 20 miles away from town, on the overgrown low populated area just outward. Often through the blackness we were encountered with a sudden turn, threatening to throw us off of the road into nearby trees. Fortuitously we survived those turns—but just 10 miles away from town our car ran out of gas. We were still rather far away, with no houses or manmade structures anywhere within a 2-mile radius. It reminded me of a jungle. Steven pulled the car to the side of the road. Neither of us owned cellular phones at the time, and we were in need of help. "I saw a gas station just a mile back. I'll be right back." He said, pulling himself out of the car. I was concerned about him—and I'm sure he felt the same about me. "Are you sure you'll be okay? It's dark, and who knows what kind of things are out there. Let me come with you." The next words he told me would replay in my head for the rest of my life. "Sheri. Whatever you do, don't leave the car." "But-" I attempted to reply. "Don't leave the car." He said again even more stern than the first time. His eyes locked on mine coldly for a few seconds, so I decided maybe it would be better if I were obedient.

My mind began to change as time went by. 30 minutes. An hour passed by still with no sign of him.

The atmosphere I was in was so very eerie- Wind whistling, trees all around hiding who-knows-what in the darkness behind. About an hour and a half since he left, I began to hear a noise—like something was just barely tapping the roof. "Tap… Tap… Tap…" I was at the same time curious and frightened to see what it was, but my beloved boyfriend's voice echoed in my mind. "Whatever you do, don't leave the car." I decided to wait until morning and try to get some sleep, but I wasn't sure how much I could get with that noise coming from the roof. Soon

enough though, I drifted off without even realizing it… In the morning I saw that my boyfriend still wasn't back yet- My mind was racing with thoughts of what may have happened to him. I noticed that the tapping hadn't stopped, and since it was daytime I decided to disregard what my boyfriend had said and go outside.

I would live to this day regretting not listening to him. As I stepped outside and turned around to shut the car door, my jaw dropped at the sight, which I saw. I saw my boyfriend hanging upside down- his legs were tied to vines from a tree that was right next to the road. His entire stomach was cut open, forming a pool of blood on the roof of the car. And his hands… His hands were just barely touching the roof—making the slightest

"Tap… Tap… Tap…"

The Russian Sleep Experiment

Russian researchers in the late 1940s kept five people awake for fifteen days using an experimental gas based stimulant. They were kept in a sealed environment to carefully monitor their oxygen intake so the gas didn't kill them, since it was toxic in high concentrations. This was before closed circuit cameras so they had only microphones and 5-inch thick glass porthole sized windows into the chamber to monitor them. The chamber was stocked with books, cots to sleep on but no bedding, running water and toilet, and enough dried food to last all five for over a month.

The test subjects were political prisoners deemed enemies of the state during World War II.

Everything was fine for the first five days; the subjects hardly complained having been promised (falsely) that they would be freed if they submitted to the

test and did not sleep for 30 days. Their conversations and activities were monitored and it was noted that they continued to talk about increasingly traumatic incidents in their past, and the general tone of their conversations took on a darker aspect after the 4 day mark.

After five days they started to complain about the circumstances and events that lead them to where they were and started to demonstrate severe paranoia. They stopped talking to each other and began alternately whispering to the microphones and one way mirrored portholes. Oddly they all seemed to think they could win the trust of the experimenters by turning over their comrades, the other subjects in captivity with them. At first the researchers suspected this was an effect of the gas itself...

After nine days the first of them started screaming. He ran the length of the chamber repeatedly yelling at the top of his lungs for 3 hours straight, he continued attempting to scream but was only able to produce occasional squeaks. The researchers postulated that he had physically torn his vocal cords. The most surprising thing about this behavior is how the other captives reacted to it... or rather didn't react to it. They continued whispering to the microphones until the second of the captives started to scream. The 2 non-screaming captives took the books apart, smeared page after page with their own feces and pasted them calmly over the glass portholes. The screaming promptly stopped.

So did the whispering to the microphones.

After 3 more days passed. The researchers checked the microphones hourly to make sure they were working, since they thought it impossible that no sound could be coming with 5 people inside. The oxygen consumption in the chamber indicated that all 5 must still be alive. In fact it was the amount of

oxygen 5 people would consume at a very heavy level of strenuous exercise. On the morning of the 14th day the researchers did something they said they would not do to get a reaction from the captives, they used the intercom inside the chamber, hoping to provoke any response from the captives they were afraid were either dead or vegetables.

They announced: "We are opening the chamber to test the microphones step away from the door and lie flat on the floor or you will be shot. Compliance will earn one of you your immediate freedom."

To their surprise they heard a single phrase in a calm voice response: "We no longer want to be freed."

Debate broke out among the researchers and the military forces funding the research. Unable to provoke any more response using the intercom it was finally decided to open the chamber at midnight on the fifteenth day.

The chamber was flushed of the stimulant gas and filled with fresh air and immediately voices from the microphones began to object. 3 different voices began begging, as if pleading for the life of loved ones to turn the gas back on. The chamber was opened and soldiers sent in to retrieve the test subjects. They began to scream louder than ever, and so did the soldiers when they saw what was inside. Four of the five subjects were still alive, although no one could rightly call the state that any of them in 'life.'

The food rations past day 5 had not been so much as touched. There were chunks of meat from the dead test subject's thighs and chest stuffed into the drain in the center of the chamber, blocking the drain and allowing 4 inches of water to accumulate on the floor. Precisely how much of the water on the floor was actually blood was never determined. All four 'surviving' test subjects also had large portions of muscle and skin

torn away from their bodies. The destruction of flesh and exposed bone on their finger tips indicated that the wounds were inflicted by hand, not with teeth as the researchers initially thought. Closer examination of the position and angles of the wounds indicated that most if not all of them were self-inflicted.

The abdominal organs below the ribcage of all four test subjects had been removed. While the heart, lungs and diaphragm remained in place, the skin and most of the muscles attached to the ribs had been ripped off, exposing the lungs through the ribcage. All the blood vessels and organs remained intact; they had just been taken out and laid on the floor, fanning out around the eviscerated but still living bodies of the subjects. The digestive tract of all four could be seen to be working, digesting food. It quickly became apparent that what they were digesting was their own flesh that they had ripped off and eaten over the course of days.

Most of the soldiers were Russian special operatives at the facility, but still many refused to return to the chamber to remove the test subjects. They continued to scream to be left in the chamber and alternately begged and demanded that the gas be turned back on, lest they fall asleep...

To everyone's surprise the test subjects put up a fierce fight in the process of being removed from the chamber. One of the Russian soldiers died from having his throat ripped out, another was gravely injured by having his testicles ripped off and an artery in his leg severed by one of the subject's teeth. Another 5 of the soldiers lost their lives if you count ones that committed suicide in the weeks following the incident.

In the struggle one of the four living subjects had his spleen ruptured and he bled out almost

immediately. The medical researchers attempted to sedate him but this proved impossible. He was injected with more than ten times the human dose of a morphine derivative and still fought like a cornered animal, breaking the ribs and arm of one doctor. When heart was seen to beat for a full two minutes after he had bled out to the point there was more air in his vascular system than blood. Even after it stopped he continued to scream and flail for another 3 minutes, struggling to attack anyone in reach and just repeating the word "MORE" over and over, weaker and weaker, until he finally fell silent.

The surviving three test subjects were heavily restrained and moved to a medical facility, the two with intact vocal cords continuously begging for the gas demanding to be kept awake...

The most injured of the three was taken to the only surgical operating room that the facility had. In the process of preparing the subject to have his organs placed back within his body it was found that he was effectively immune to the sedative they had given him to prepare him for the surgery. He fought furiously against his restraints when the anesthetic gas was brought out to put him under. He managed to tear most of the way through a 4-inch wide leather strap on one wrist, even through the weight of a 200-pound soldier holding that wrist as well. It took only a little more anesthetic than normal to put him under, and the instant his eyelids fluttered and closed, his heart stopped. In the autopsy of the test subject that died on the operating table it was found that his blood had triple the normal level of oxygen. His muscles that were still attached to his skeleton were badly torn and he had broken 9 bones in his struggle to not be subdued. Most of them were from the force his own muscles had exerted on them.

The second survivor had been the first of the group of five to start screaming. His vocal cords destroyed he was unable to beg or object to surgery, and he only reacted by shaking his head violently in disapproval when the anesthetic gas was brought near him. He shook his head yes when someone suggested, reluctantly, they try the surgery without anesthetic, and did not react for the entire 6-hour procedure of replacing his abdominal organs and attempting to cover them with what remained of his skin. The surgeon presiding stated repeatedly that it should be medically possible for the patient to still be alive. One terrified nurse assisting the surgery stated that she had seen the patients mouth curl into a smile several times, whenever his eyes met hers.

When the surgery ended the subject looked at the surgeon and began to wheeze loudly, attempting to talk while struggling. Assuming this must be something of drastic importance the surgeon had a pen and pad fetched so the patient could write his message. It was simple. "Keep cutting."

The other two test subjects were given the same surgery, both without anesthetic as well. Although they had to be injected with a paralytic for the duration of the operation; the surgeon found it impossible to perform the operation while the patients laughed continuously. Once paralyzed the subjects could only follow the attending researchers with their eyes. The paralytic cleared their system in an abnormally short period of time and they were soon trying to escape their bonds. The moment they could speak they were again asking for the stimulant gas. The researchers tried asking why they had injured themselves, why they had ripped out their own guts and why they wanted to be given the gas again.

Only one response was given: "I must remain awake."

All three subject's restraints were reinforced and they were placed back into the chamber awaiting determination as to what should be done with them. The researchers, facing the wrath of their military 'benefactors' for having failed the stated goals of their project considered euthanizing the surviving subjects. The commanding officer, an ex-KGB instead saw potential, and wanted to see what would happen if they were put back on the gas. The researchers strongly objected, but were overruled.

In preparation for being sealed in the chamber again the subjects were connected to an EEG monitor and had their restraints padded for long term confinement. To everyone's surprise all three stopped struggling the moment it was let slip that they were going back on the gas. It was obvious that at this point all three were putting up a great struggle to stay awake. One of subjects that could speak was humming loudly and continuously; the mute subject was straining his legs against the leather bonds with all his might, first left, then right, then left again for something to focus on. The remaining subject was holding his head off his pillow and blinking rapidly. Having been the first to be wired for EEG most of the researchers were monitoring his brain waves in surprise. They were normal most of the time but sometimes flat lined inexplicably. It looked as if he were repeatedly suffering brain death, before returning to normal. As they focused on paper scrolling out of the brainwave monitor only one nurse saw his eyes slip shut at the same moment his head hit the pillow. His brainwaves immediately changed to that of deep sleep, then flat lined for the last time as his heart simultaneously stopped.

The only remaining subject that could speak started screaming to be sealed in now. His brainwaves showed the same flat lines as one who had just died from falling

asleep. The commander gave the order to seal the chamber with both subjects inside, as well as 3 researchers. One of the named three immediately drew his gun and shot the commander point blank between the eyes, then turned the gun on the mute subject and blew his brains out as well.

He pointed his gun at the remaining subject, still restrained to a bed as the remaining members of the medical and research team fled the room. "I won't be locked in here with these things! Not with you!" he screamed at the man strapped to the table. "WHAT ARE YOU?" he demanded. "I must know!"

The subject smiled.

"Have you forgotten so easily?" The subject asked. "We are you. We are the madness that lurks within you all, begging to be free at every moment in your deepest animal mind. We are what you hide from in your beds every night. We are what you sedate into silence and paralysis when you go to the nocturnal haven where we cannot tread."

The researcher paused. Then aimed at the subject's heart and fired. The EEG flat lined as the subject weakly choked out, "So... nearly... free..."

Huntsville Camping Trip

I went camping about three weekends ago in the Huntsville national forest in Texas. 3 friends and me that came home for the weekend, they are all in college and usually we all get together at least once a year, old friends from high school. For the camping trip we planned to go backpacking deep in the forest, live off of fish that we catch and animals that we can trap. We have been doing this for a while in Texas and in numerous places, Arizona, Colorado (if anyone is familiar with the Spanish peaks there), New Mexico, so we‘re pretty much used to anything you‘d encounter out there.

It was my turn to pick where we went camping, so I chose Huntsville (more accurately it's Huntsville/New Waverly). So we drive up there, park our car in a camping park spot, and start walking off into the forest. We had some laughs along the way, everyone catching up with each other's lives. We walked until it started to get dark and set up camp where we stopped. Everyone gathered wood to make a fire and we set our tent up. And we do what we always do: try and scare each other with weird stories.

Around this time we started to smell something very faint. It was noticeable, but not overbearing. We couldn't put our finger on what it was, so we just carried on. Mike had to go piss and he walked off in the forest. A second later he come running back, piss all down his jeans like he'd missed really bad. Immediately we all crack up and throw some jokes at him. Then we noticed that he was white as snow and trying to catch his breath. He starts screaming for us to follow him, and runs off.

We all get serious and go follow him, not knowing what the problem was. We start to hear a faint scream and crying in the distance, in the direction we were running. It was pitch black away from the camp and Mike had the only flash light (we left ours at the camp, he had his from his trip taking a piss), so at this stage we didn't have much choice but to follow the light, which was frantically pointing here and there in front of him.

The scream gets closer and Mike starts to slow down. We then notice a ratty old cabin that looked like it was abandoned, except for a faint light that we could see from one of the old mildew covered windows. The crying was intense: whoever it was couldn't breathe enough to let out a full yell. We all followed Mike up to the front door and we could all hear the

crying from inside. As soon as he knocked on the door it stopped.

We all waited and heard really heavy footsteps walking fast to the door. There was a giant slam against the door and the sound of a bolt unlocking. Then nothing. We waited for a bit, knocked a few more times, but still nothing happened. We walked around the house (there was no fucking way any of us were leaving each other's side) and noticed a window, which was a good way up. Alex took a deep breath and said asked us to give him a boost so he could see inside. Mike and me lifted him up to the window. We watched him brush away dirt and webs from the window and place his face close to the window to try and see something.

There was a quick beat. Then suddenly he breathed in fast and let out a loud scream. Then he fell back from the window, screaming bloody murder the whole way. We all tried to calm him down but he was hysterical. We went to him but he started to shake, punch, kick, cuss, you name it, and then took off towards the camp.

None of us wanted to be separated so we all ran close behind him. We caught up to him and grabbed him and set him down. The fire was dying out so I grabbed some nearby wood that we collected added it to the fire. My hands were shaking and I had to do something. I went back to Alex and we all tried to calm him down. He wouldn't he kept screaming and was breathing so hard that he eventually fainted.

All of us are terrified now, and we all kept the fire high until sunrise. Periodically Alex kept waking up, screaming just like before. By sunrise he was up and looked catatonic, just mumbling to himself and whimpering.

Mike and me decide to go look at the cabin now it was daylight. We searched where we thought it was, except there was nothing there… Nothing at all. The indistinct smell from last night had now grown

into a very strong smell of something dead, something stale. We headed back to the camping site. When we got there we found Alex had chewed into the sides of his face and swallowed so much blood that he was throwing up. John was at his back, and he looked like he was about to die from exhaustion. I guess we all looked that way, I just didn't notice until I saw his face. Alex said, quietly, that we need to leave. Now.

We all started to pack up the tent. It started to rain really heavily (it was about noon) and the sky started to grow really dark. Alex started to go into a panic. He went and grabbed a large stick and yelled at us to leave it and leave, now, or he'd knock us out and drag us out of there himself. Mike started to yell at him, and they started to fight. We broke it up and finished packing, and then started to make our way back. After a little while we arrived at a creek we had crossed the previous day, only it was flooded over, and the water was moving too fast for us to cross it. Alex started to scream again, yelling at Mike for taking his time packing up the tent when we could have gotten out of here. This went on for a while until we finally convinced Alex to calm down and tell us what happened.

He said as soon as he put his face to the glass, a face on the other side did the same thing, and started to smile really big. It had dark eyes and a dark mouth which was much bigger then Alex's, as the smile got as large as it could. A giant shadow behind it swung something down and sliced it's face off. The face was stuck to the window, and he said it started to laugh quietly as it slid down. Mike, still pissed off (and though he wouldn't admit it, beginning to get freaked out), started to argue with him again. We eventually started to follow the creek for a way to cross.

We then started to see toys floating in the creek. They were really old toys, old Barbie dolls and baby dolls. This wasn't like any old trash floating in the creek, though… this was a lot of Barbie's, a lot of baby dolls. One washed towards the side and Mike picked it up. It had some kind of voice chip that was dying and started to say some gurgling words we couldn't understand, followed by it's sad excuse for laughter. Then it sounded like it was whispering. We thought the batteries must be dying, he threw it down.

We kept going, and the sun was starting to set. Alex was freaking out more now, and was whimpering and breathing heavily. We all started to see shadows move behind trees, something we all called BS on until we all were seeing it. It was barely light out and we stop as we see the cabin right in front of us. None of us knows what to think. Mike says, "This is bullshit, I'm going in there." Alex tries to stop him. We all do, all of us just wanted to go home. Mike says to all of us to fuck off, do our own thing, he doesn't care anymore, and this is all bull. We start to hear hundreds of the same sort baby doll as before, laughing, whispering and trying to sing. We start to move forward past the cabin, all of us, and kept pushing forward. We smelled something dead in the air, something stale. It was the same something as before. We started to hear something crying, and something screaming. We kept on going. We eventually crossed the creek and left the woods. We went back to our vehicle and got in. Its pitch black, and we drive. We are about to get on the 45 to Houston but the road is under construction and can't be accessed. It points to a detour. As we head towards the detour it seems to be small, bumpy dirt road going into the woods.

We then see a young girl come up to us. She looks like she was in trouble, young and pretty. She approaches the passenger side door and she looks like she's really

drugged up, or beaten up. Alex doesn't roll down the windows, nor does he open the door. She reaches for the handle and he immediately locks it. She puts her face on the window and starts to smile really big. We floor it, Alex starts to cry and scream and we are all breathing heavy. We finally cut on a street that takes us to the 45 and we take it the whole way. When we get back to my apartment everyone doesn't know what to say and we all break apart and go our separate ways.

Mike messages me later and says he is going to go back. I try to convince him not to and all he does is say it was our own minds that were screwing with us. I think he just went to prove to himself he wasn't scared. I can smell that stench everywhere now. I don't go out anymore, I just stay in and don't answer the door. Last week everyone I met was acting really strange, people that I knew for a long time and total strangers. My own dad, when I went to his place to eat supper with him he just watched me, strangely, when I was sitting down. He didn't say a word the whole time. I kept asking him "What's wrong?" He just slowly shook his head.

When I was leaving to go home I turned to wave. He had black eyes and an open mouth like he was in pain. When I started to walk back he shut the door and bolted it. I stayed there knocking and knocking. Nothing. I called him, and his phone was disconnected. I even called the police. Halfway through the questions they were asking me the connection started to fade into static. I could hear a faint mumbling, singing and laughing.

Mike has completely vanished. There is not even a record of him being alive. When I call Alex's house they talk to me like I'm some salesman. They say they don't know any Alex and to please stop calling. The person who tells me that is Alex's mother. I can't get ahold of John. Someone knocked on

my door and when I went to look I saw a face completely covering the peephole and a giant smile started to form.

I called the cops again and instead of it turning into static they got really strange. “Sir, are you affected by any drugs at the moment?” “No.” “Are you coming home anytime soon?” “Excuse me?” “Come home.” and the phone call ended. My mail slot swings every now and then. Someone is sliding pieces of baby dolls through it. I try to call people now and all I can hear is static and bad baby doll noises and this crying and screaming. My TV is busted but when I go to piss I can hear it on. I might be going insane.

Whoever lives above me started to scream in pain and crying deeply recently. I hear giant footsteps from their apartment; I hear bangs and something falling to the ground. From the neighbors to the right of my apartment I hear what sounds like a baby that never gets tended too and then it sounds like a baby doll whose batteries are dying. My phone has been ringing now and it’s Alex telling me things in a language that I have never heard before, nor could even manage to repeat. I kept getting emails of pictures of black and small colorations, now I can’t even access my email. Someone knocks on the door, and then they slam against it. I hear the bolts unlocking one by one and I run to make sure to lock all of them back.

Then, I sit down and begin to cry. . . .

The Willow Men

There’s a local legend where I come from. They’re simply referred to as the willow men.

There’s hardly a need for the law enforcement in this town. The willow men take care of all that. Every single step taken, every word spoken, every drop of blood spilt; the willow men know about it before anyone else. Believe me, anyone

that has invoked the wrath of the willow men has gone missing without a trace.

That's why when I realized what I had done it was too late. The willow men were coming.

She just wouldn't shut the hell up. No matter what I said and what I would do she was just hysterical. She kept pacing about the house screaming. She said she found this and that and knew I was cheating on her. She'd ask me who it was and I told her she was crazy. I guess I wore that excuse out. After a while, I couldn't take her damn voice anymore. I'd walk room to room and she'd follow me. When we got to the kitchen I had my fill.

I reached for the first knife I could find and jammed it into her throat. The face of anger and sorrow melted into one of despair and disbelief. The crimson fluid ran freely all over her blouse and she dropped to her knees, scrambling around on the floor. She clawed at the tile and made gurgling noises, which only served to infuriate me. I grabbed an iron skillet that had been pre-heating on the stove and took a swing at her head. A wet crack followed the impact and while I didn't need to keep going I did.

I lost count of the number of times I hit her but I had a good deal of blood on me. What was left of her head was being held together by thin particles of bone and blood continued to rush out. I dropped the skillet to the floor with a loud clang. I wish remorse could have followed so I would've felt a least a bit human but it didn't. I was just happy to be rid of her. With a grunt I picked her body up off the floor and hoisted it unto my shoulder. Her face hung next to me, dead eyes staring with conviction. I could only chuckle. As soon as I got outside, I dropped the ragged heap onto the ground and went to find a shovel. That's when I knew they were watching.

I could hear the whispers from the woods and in the corners of my eyes I could see them staring intently at my every move. Whenever I would look up to the woods I would find only gnarled trees staring back at me. I knew they were there. It was dusk by the time she was good and buried. I was drenched in sweat and it had made the bloodstains on my clothes expand and turn orange. I looked back up to the woods and I saw them peering from behind the trees; long, gnarled faces with hollow eyes and gaunt figures. I could only half see the faces as they chose to hide behind their precious trees but they were there. Watching, whispering…

"What are you staring for, bastards?! You heard her! I had to do it," I yelled at them.

Was I expecting a response? I don't know. They just continued to watch me from behind the trees. I spit on the ground and threw the shovel down. They would come for me under cover of darkness and I wasn't going without a fight. I stole away into the house and prepared. I pushed couches and dressers in front of doorways. I nailed wooden boards haphazardly to cover all the windows. As the sun crept underneath the horizon a great trepidation settled in the pit of my stomach. Was it honestly nerves? I hated to think it was such a powerful fear that I would start breaking into an ice cold sweat. I loaded up my shotgun and reached for a bottle of whiskey. I forced down a mouthful and then another and slammed the rest of the bottle against the wall in frustration.

One door I left open. It was the back door that stared out to the woods. I put a chair down in front of it and sat, shotgun in my lap. They were still staring at me; the willow men. We stayed staring at one another for three days. Eventually, exhaustion began to get the best of me and I started to nod off. I tried desperately to keep my

eyes open. For a foolish second I propped my head up with the shotgun so that it wouldn't fall. I snapped back to reason and lifted my head high. Last thing I wanted to do was shoot myself. Had I known what was coming I probably should have.

I pushed myself to stay up for a few more hours. The day came and went and it was the dead of night before I knew it. They persisted behind the trees. I began to rationalize that if I closed my eyes for a second, I could have enough time to open them while the willow men were coming at me so I could take a few down. Smiling I did just that. Of course, its' difficult to tell how long you were asleep. Could be a second, could be for days. I opened my eyes again and found I was still sitting in my chair with my shotgun in my lap. I snapped up when I saw that the willow men were no longer behind the trees. I flipped out and held the shotgun up, darting around barrel first. I took a few steps outside and tried to control my heavy breaths. I shook damn near uncontrollably and found it impossible to keep the gun steady.

I began to calm down when I didn't see anything outside and began to return to my post when I stopped dead in my tracks. I felt tears well in my eyes and something began to push up and out of my throat. The willow men were peering from around the doorway and the sides of the house. I froze staring at their gnarled up faces and branch-like hands. I had to do something. I pulled the gun up and fired off a round. It managed to take out part of the doorframe but it missed any of them altogether. I popped open the shotgun and madly grasped for a fresh shell in my pocket. I successfully reloaded it and lifted the gun back up.

The willow men continued to look at me from where they had been. I took careful aim this time and fired once more. Another shot hit the doorframe this time although closer to the willow men. I fumbled

for a third round and as I did, I saw a large shadow cover me. Looking up, the willow men were upon me. I screamed and closed the barrel down on my thumb effectively severing it. Immediately after that, I lost all consciousness and collapsed.

When I awoke, it was ice cold. My vision began to return to me slowly and I could feel that I was being dragged. My heart sank when I looked around. Darkness stretched as far as the eye could see and I knew I was in the deepest part of the woods. Where my thumb had once been was black and swollen and had managed to numb up to my forearm. My ankles were in severe pain too but I didn't know why. When I looked, I saw that they had been clearly snapped and the willow men were dragging me by my feet. I began to scream as loudly as possible for someone, anyone.

All I did was cause more willow men to appear and watch me from behind the strangest willow trees I'd ever seen. Their trunks were small and looked just like leather. The earth around them was red and moist yet where I was being dragged was dry, rugged land. I looked up to the canopy and wish I hadn't. Skinless corpses hung down, bloods dripping freely to feed what I now knew were flesh-bound trees. My screams were swallowed by the dark and my throat gave out, hoarse from the strain. In the silence, I heard a faint moaning.

I looked around to see if there was someone else here for some poor bastard who suffered my same fate. To my horror, I discovered the source of the moans. The bodies hanging on the branches of the trees were all still alive. Soon, I too would have my flesh torn asunder and be damned to hang up there and feed the hungry willow trees. There was nothing I could but accept my fate. The willow men had me.

String Theory

Have you ever had an experience that suggested someone else was in your house, and just thought, “I don’t wanna know” and left it? Sometimes, fear of the unknown just seems like the preferable option than facing a real, concrete danger. Normally it’s nothing, though. One time, the beeper function of my wireless house phone went off, when I was the only one home. It could only be called from the living room. Another time, I swear someone took some change from my desk. They’re all probably just slightly disconcerting tricks of the memory.

But what would you do when something truly suggestive happens? Would you run, or just ignore it, like I did?

Last Monday was a normal day. I got up, brushed my teeth, changed into school clothes… All little parts of my morning ritual. It seemed like it would be another totally un-noteworthy day, until I saw the strings.

There were three or four thick twine strings in my room. They crisscrossed between the walls around my bed, one attached to the door. No way would I have missed them before; I should have tripped over them. They were tied to pins in the walls, which had also not existed before ten seconds ago.

Nobody could have been in my room while I was in it, let alone set this up. It was early, and my brain wasn’t processing correctly. I simply discredited the sight, untied the strings and left for school, leaving them balled up on my desk.

It didn’t get any better later. Outside my house there were hundreds of them, tied between houses, around cars, across streets… This had to be some super elaborate prank. One of those hidden camera shows, or a comedy improv blog. They had gotten everyone else to play along too; passers-by were tangled in them, tying them to objects they were

walking towards and away from, as if they had been and were continuing to follow the course laid out for them.

I nervously continued my journey to school. On the bus, every except me was tied to the door. At school, groups of friends were tied to each other; teachers were tied to their desks and boards. Oddly enough, at this point all I could wonder was why I had been left out.

When my friend Lucy sat beside me in first period, she simply plunked her bag down on my lap and rested her chin in her hand, looking right past me to the window outside.

"Hey Lucy."

No response.

"Come on, I didn't expect you to be in on this too. "

She sighed and started taking books from her bag. All the books were tied to her hands. I grinned, and yanked one of the strings off a book. She didn't seem to notice, instead simply disregarding the book completely, letting it drop to the floor without a moment's hesitation.

"Um." I leaned down, picking up her book and placing it back on her desk. She took no notice.

"Well, if that's how we're gonna play it." I smiled, trying to look playful, but really just trying to hide my nervousness. I bundled all the strings attached to her together with one hand, then pulled them all free. She blinked, turning to stare at me.

"Holy crap, Martin. You're like a ninja or something."

"I've been sitting here for maybe ten minutes." I smiled again; relieved my friend had finally "noticed" me.

"Where did all these strings come from??" She gasped, seemingly noticing for the first time. "I assumed you were all fucking with me…"

She stood up, backing into a corner. No one else in the class noticed.

"They weren't here just a minute ago! Do you see them too??" Her tone made it clear she was genuinely scared.

"No. Didn't you-. " I was interrupted by my teacher slamming the door behind her. Everyone except Lucy and me murmured a good morning, and still, no one seemed to pay either of us any notice. "People have been ignoring me all day." I said to Lucy, before turning to our teacher. "Hey! Dumb bitch! You can't teach for shit!"

No reaction.

"I'm getting away from all this shit." Lucy pulled a few strings aside and left the class. I followed, and surprise-surprise, no one else noticed.

We wandered the corridors, leaving and entering classes as we saw fit. Whenever we untied a chair or book from someone else, it was like it suddenly didn't matter to them. It didn't exist.

I showed her the street outside; there were twice as many more strings than when I came in this morning. We carefully picked our way through the tangle, making our way to a nearby coffee shop. Not particularly grand, I know. But what would you do in our situation? As I said, fear of the unknown sometimes seems like the safer option. On a few occasions, I suggested we untie a few more people. Lucy was opposed to it, remembering how terrified she'd been.

In the coffee shop, we grabbed a couple of sandwiches and drinks from the fridge. We found a table, untied all strings attached to the chairs, and sat down. We both ate in silence, both of us too scared, both of us distracting ourselves by watching the strangers in the shop, oblivious to the strings. After twenty minutes, Lucy spoke up. "Now she's gonna take that sandwich."

She said, pointing at a woman across the shop. Sure enough, she walked to the fridge and took the plastic wrapped sandwich she was tied to. “She pays for it and leaves.” She did so, according to the prophecies of the strings. “That guy doesn’t intend to pay.” I watched as a man took his coffee and ran out of the store, the two servers just looking too exasperated to go after him.

“This is horrible.” She whimpered. “Let’s go. Please.”

Outside wasn’t much better. Everyone just followed the strings’ instructions, going about their daily lives. Lucy announced she was going home to sleep this off, and I agreed to walk her home. She only lived ten minutes away.

Away from the busier part of town there were fewer strings. It was nicer; we could pretend it wasn’t happening.

When we turned onto Lucy’s street, she stopped, her mouth falling open.

“What now?” I broke the silence, my voice sounding surprisingly small.

”Look.” She pointed outside one of her neighbor’s houses.

I saw it clearly, and I’ll take my memory of that moment ‘til the day I die. A little dark imp, maybe three feet tall, walked along with its knuckles on the ground, almost like a monkey. It had two bulbous yellow eyes taking up about half its face, and no mouth or any other facial features. It was holding a hammer and a ball of twine, which it was letting out behind it.

It walked quickly and quietly from the front door of the house to the mailbox. It stopped, hammered a nail into the side of the box, and tied it’s string around it. It turned to face us, and stopped when it spotted us.

My bottom fell out even further than it had already been, but it just stared with a look of surprise and curiosity. You could almost say it was the more frightened one. Suddenly, it beckoned to us with its tiny hand.

I looked at Lucy, she hadn't moved. I looked back at the imp, which stared at me. I halved the distance between us, and then halved it again. This wasn't fear of the unknown anymore; it was fear of this little guy. Didn't seem like anything to be scared of. When I was a meter away from it, it extended its hand.

"Uh. Hi." I shook it. It nodded in approval, blinking its massive yellow eyes up at me.

"So you're the ones in charge of the strings?" It nodded eagerly. I called Lucy over, but she stayed where she was.

"There are more of you?" Another nod. I wanted to ask it so many questions, about what it was and where it came from, but it seemed for now I was stuck with only yes or no questions.

"Do we even have free will?"

It just looked at me, almost sadly. I immediately felt sick to my stomach, and couldn't bear looking at the little monster anymore. I grabbed Lucy, who had been listening to our exchange, and now sat on the curb with her head in her hands.

"Come on."

We entered her house, and I made her a cup of tea. When I found her in the living room, she had untied her dog and was curled up with it, crying. I set the tea down and sat beside her.

"I'm so scared." She whispered after a good ten minutes of sobbing. I didn't answer. I couldn't.

"I'm going to sleep" She mumbled suddenly, and was under within the minute. Sleep was starting to sound

pretty good all of a sudden, my eyelids suddenly felt like they were being weighed down.

I collapsed to the rug, and the last thing I heard before I fell asleep was the scurrying of several sets of little feet nearby.

I felt much better the next day, as if the whole affair had been a dream. I'd probably have believed that if Lucy's mother hadn't awaked me that morning, wondering what I was doing sleeping over without permission or something.

Over breakfast, Lucy asked me why I looked so pale and nervous. I turned to her and smiled, mumbling something to her about feeling sick.

But the truth was, I was scared because I couldn't see any strings, and was wondering whether my actions were truly my own.

Prey

My story takes place in a town you've probably never heard of in southeastern rural Kentucky. It's a small town with its people sparsely peppering the mountainsides to and fro. It's the type of town where it isn't exactly unusual to find neighbors bartering for goods with livestock, living off what the land provides, and making do with what they've got. It is here that my father was raised. It is here that my father raised his family.

My father was a proud man; short, barely 5'7", but stout. He was a mountaineer, carpenter, a survivor, and a hunter, but mostly, he was proud. He instilled in me all the virtues that I believe in today. He's the type of man that would give you the last dollar to his name. The type that would go hungry to make sure his children were fed, and there were times that he did. I suppose I should clarify that I grew up in poverty. No doubt there were those that were worse off than me, but times were hard nonetheless. My father worked intermittently, mostly in construction. There were few homes

within the community that my father did not at least help with. He built our house from the ground up, dug out the basement, and leveled the land with little more than a shovel, wheel barrel, and the helping hands of my uncle and two older brothers. Our house sat on a hillside, in a leveled alcove; the yard stretched on for what seemed like forever, ending at a fresh mountain brook where the woodland lied beyond.

He spent a lot of time in those woods — hiking trails, digging ginseng, hunting, and otherwise passing time. The mountains provided our family with many necessities. Our water was pumped from a mine near the mountain's peak. Our food consisted mainly of game and livestock. My mother is a wonderful cook. She had a fondness for chicken — which we raised. My father, on the other hand, preferred game. No stranger to the culinary arts, my father was adept at preparing a variety of dishes, all of which he tracked and killed himself. Long before the sun would rise, my father would grab his light and head out. He would follow the mountain stream before turning off onto one of the many mine roads that littered the terrain. One such road ran by an old graveyard long since forgotten by the rest of the world. Some headstones there dated back to the onset of the 19th century.

I recall one night my father decided to go spotting. For those of you unfamiliar, spotting is a common practice amongst Appalachian hunters (perhaps amongst hunters in general, but I do not hunt so I am not sure). The hunter will set out before sunrise, taking a light and little else. The hunter will then proceed to shine the light, much like a spotlight, in hopes of catching a glimpse of an animal's eyes. You see, the eyes of an animal are luminous; and in complete darkness when the light passes over them they will shine. This is a method of establishing good hunting venues. On this

particular night, my father broke tradition and decided to take his shotgun with him on his spotting expedition. This decision, I would later learn, saved his life.

It was a warm spring night. I was always a night owl, so when my father stirred, I was still awake and playing my Super Nintendo. It was not a school night, so I was greeted with his ever-present smile. “Hey big man,” he chimed. “You’re up late.”

“I want to beat Mario,” I told him, my eyes leaving the screen long enough to see him tying his boots. He didn’t reply, he just smiled and rubbed my head as he passed me on his way to the gun cabinet. From it, he removed his customary 12-gauge shotgun, some rounds, and a miner’s light. The light, I recall, strapped to his forehead and attached to a rather large battery that he hung at his waist. He then made his way to the couch and sat next to me. He casually lifted the TV remote and waited. When I finished the level he smiled.

“Pause it. I need to check the forecast,” he told me. I obliged and he changed the channel. He watched as the forecaster rambled on about the weather and seemed content. “Not giving rain for today. That’s good.” He turned to me and smiled again. “Okay. You can go back to your game. I’m going out. I’ll be back in a while, tell your mother I’ll bring home supper. Tonight, we’re going to have rabbit.” He kissed my forehead and stood. I smiled at him as he rounded the hallway corner to our front door. I listened to the door shut and to the clunk of his boots as he made his way off the porch, down the steps and through the yard. His steps faded in the distance. From this point on, I cannot vouch for the validity of my tale, but I can tale you that the man who returned was not the man that left. Make no mistake, my father did return; but he was a changed man. He never spoke much of

that night until after I had started college. This is his story.

Like most other nights, he headed up the mountain via a trail that ran alongside the brook. The air was still and warm and the moon and stars shone bright. There were no clouds, and the forecast was clear. The sound of cicadas and crickets filled the air. He made his way along the trail intermittently shining his light on either side of the stream. He walked along the stream until he reached a fork in the path. To his left was his customary turn off, further up that trail was an old slate dump. Above it was a derelict coal shoot. He shined his light along that trail and contemplated. He had been talking with his hunting buddies and they had mentioned a sweet spot near the graveyard. A warren of rabbits had apparently taken residence near the abandoned cemetery, and they had all had good fortune when hunting there. My father thought on it for a moment before turning to the right. The trail on the right lead up the mountain to the mine. This is where we drew our water. It passed by the cemetery where the rabbits were said to reside. He continued to follow the stream until making his way to the cemetery.

Upon his arrival, he skimmed his light back and forth across the plots. If there was a warren here, the rabbits were definitely not being very active tonight. He trudged amongst the plots until finally deciding to move on. He walked back to the trail and stopped. He could go back along the stream trail and to the slate dump — at the very least, he thought, he could cover grounds he was used to hunting. Instead, he decided to follow the trail further. He had been walking for a little more than fifteen minutes when he noticed a strange phenomenon. The light from the moon and stars was completely gone. Clouds covered the sky and in the distance somewhere there was flash of lightning. He counted the

seconds to the thunder. The sky roared a moment then fell silent. There was no rain. He silently observed his surroundings, shining his light on either side of the trail. He paused for a moment longer, and then trudged on. As he walked he noticed something else. Very faint, and very rhythmically his footsteps were echoing. This was unusual. If you've ever been in a wooded mountain, one thing you'll notice is that the mountains are excellent listeners and seldom repeat what they're told. It was then the silence consumed him. The cicadas, the crickets, and the owls — they were all hushed. My father stopped and shined his light around him. He saw nothing and after a moment he continued along the trail.

The echo was silent for a moment then started up again. With every crunch of my father's feet, he could hear a crunch simultaneously hit the trail behind him. Someone, or something, was following him. Deliberately and furtively stalking him. He stopped again, and so did his echo. He shined the light around him again, in all directions: down the trail, into the trees, and even into the air.

Nothing.

There was absolutely nothing there. He carefully observed his surroundings. It was then he noticed another trail, not three feet from him on the other side of the brush. Silently, he began devising a plan. He decided that he would begin walking again, and when the echo recommenced he'd take another step…but he'd stop. If it were his mind playing tricks then the echo would stop too. He turned up the trail and continued along his way. Within moments the echo re-emerged. He waited until he was confident it the time was right, and he stepped…and stopped mid step. His foot was barely an inch from the ground.

CRUNCH

The sound resonated through his being and sent shivers down his spine. He spun around and shined the light again only to be greeted by darkness. He turned back up the trail and quickened his pace. This time the strides did not mimic his own. They were faster and louder. It dawned on my father at this point that he had pissed it off, whatever it was. He loaded his shotgun as another plan developed in his mind. He decided to step through the brush to the trail on the other side. There he would wait for it to pass him, and he would turn the tides. Without hesitation he cut off his light and stepped across the brush and waited in darkness. The sound of its strides continued up the trail before stopping what sounded like mere feet away. Then it crossed through the brush, coming to a halt beside him. His stomach sank and he fumbled for his light. He could feel eyes burning into his skin, boring holes into his brain. The light came on with a sudden flash…nothing. There was absolutely nothing there. He shined the light all around him. There was no sign of anything passing through the brush, no sign of anything walking along the trail. My father, an expert hunter, could find no trace of the thing that was stalking him. He shined his light further up the trail and saw something. A building…the old coal shoot that was just above the slate dump. He bolted for it. He could hear its strides coming up fast behind him. He turned into the coal shoot and dove in. The shoot collapsed around him, sending him pouring down onto slate and rock. He quickly made his way to his feet and shined his light towards the shoot, shotgun in firing position. He could hear it moving fast up the trail. He heard it hit the coal shoot. The shoot thundered and trembled under its weight, but my father couldn't see anything. He blindly fired, pumped, and fired again and again. The boom of his shotgun echoed throughout the valley…the sound matched by a

roar that made the hair on his neck stand. The shoot was silent for a moment. Then he heard its strides bolt in the opposite direction. It made its way up the mountain towards the mine. He listened for a long time. Silence.

He got home around noon. He was beaten up pretty badly from his fall. He never said a word. My mother attempted to console him, and he silently looked at her. His eyes filled with dread and his ever-present smile gone. Not long after that he and my mom separated. The court ordered that the house be turned over to me upon my 21st birthday. I returned home to find him sitting on the porch, shotgun beside him. He had long since erected a security fence around the property. He told me his tale and he told me that he continued to hear it. When he walked to his mother's or when he trimmed the hedges and mowed the lawn. He could hear it following him. Ever presently, it stalked him. Hunted him.

After my father passed, I left the house empty. It didn't feel right taking it when he had built it from the ground up. But then I met the woman who would become my wife. We married after I graduated college, and now she's pregnant with my son. I brought my family back here, to raise them where I was raised.

But I write this now because I am afraid. Each night I do a quick sweep of the property. I check the house and then I check the yard…and each night I can hear my footsteps echoing beyond the fence.

Mason

It was a dark and rainy day in February when I was hit by a small red pick up. February 15th. I was told I flew 15 feet before landing smack on my head. Apparently the driver was drunk and didn't see me crossing.

I don't remember that day at all.

Four weeks I slept, in a coma that many feared I would never come out of. I was placed in a ward of children and teens with major bodily harm or disease. My roommate was a boy named Mason. I never did find out his last name. For the time in which I slept, he found out bits and pieces of me from my various visitors. My favorite color, what music I liked, and other random things.

The day I woke up, I was showered with love and attention from my family and it took me almost an hour to realize the presence of the boy lying in the bed beside me. He flashed me a lopsided grin and quietly went back to the book he was reading.

Eventually I was left in peace and after about 20 minutes of mental debate, I spoke up and asked him his name. His voice was smooth and low and never failed to make me shudder. We spent the rest of the evening playing 20 questions and becoming familiar with each other.

Eventually, my doctor would break our quality time and give me the low down on my injuries and what the healing process would be like. He told me that when I was hit, not only did I give myself a nasty concussion, but my legs were also broken in my oh-so-gracefully landing.

They said I had a 60% chance of ever walking again.

We became close instantaneously. The nurses would laugh and say we already looked like an old married couple bundled up in bed watching whatever soap opera happened to be on television. Mason would just flash me his trademark grin while I blushed and buried my face in his chest.

We both had our good days and bad ones, Mason and I. On a particularly tough day of treatment for him, we both lay together with him trembling in my arms. I'll never forget the feeling of his soft hiccups or the knot at the pit of my stomach. I finally got up my

courage and asked him the million-dollar question.

He had Hodgkin's disease. I don't think either of us slept that night.

While my legs were transitioned from casts to braces, Mason's chemotherapy began. However, without fail, when I'd come back frustrated or in tears over a difficult session of therapy, he'd be there to comfort me with soothing words and reruns of I Love Lucy.

Over the weeks, the chemo began to take its toll. His brown curls thinned to almost nothing, dark circles took permanent residence under his eyes, and his skin turned as pale as snow. As my legs grew stronger, the day I was released no longer seemed like something to look forward to.

The day we decided to shave his hair was the day I broke down. I told him I would do anything; give blood, bone marrow, anything to make him get better faster, but he just shot me his smile that instantly made me melt and wiped my tears away.

60%. Mason had a sixty percent chance of beating his demons, the same as me.

On May 12, I was officially released from room 104. I would walk with a limp most likely for the rest of my life. Every other day I would visit Mason. Each time I would leave we would take a picture together. Over the months I could compare our first picture and our most recent one and see how much he was deteriorating. It was heartbreaking.

August 17 was the first time I lost him. Overnight a high fever had broken out and his heart stopped for 4 1/2 minutes. Those were the worst minutes of my life. I sat outside his room in an uncomfortable plastic chair watching the nurses I knew all too well scrambling back and forth

attempting to save his fragile life.

I didn't leave his side until he squeezed my hand, winked, and told me to go home and take a shower.

After that, I vowed I would never let him leave me alone again.

I guess the odds weren't in Mason's favor for by the time Thanksgiving came around, he was almost a skeleton. But I didn't care.

He confided in me that night, accepting the fact that his time was almost up and promising to wait for me on the other side. I begged him not to go, but he just lightly shook his head and rubbed soft circles into my back. He wasn't going to survive to see Christmas.

That was two months ago.

No longer being able to bear to see him hooked up to all sorts of machines, we decided to steal away in the night together. I bundled him up and we drove away in my mother's car until we arrived at an old cabin my family would stay in during the holidays. Mason and I couldn't be any happier. I don't care that I'm on the news every night, or that every cop in the county is looking for me.

All I care about is being with Mason forever.

Even if his flesh is crawling with maggots and beginning to peel off his bones, Even if the smell off his rotting cadaver never fades from my skin. His lips are still warm at night and he often whispers sweet secrets into my ear before we sleep. No one, not the police, doctors, or anyone else can ever separate us. I'm ready for them when they come.

I made sure to bring the sharpest scalpel I could find when we left the hospital.

But until then, I'll lay in Mason's arms, or at least what I think were once his strong

appendages, and we'll talk all night until he takes me away.

We'll be together forever.

The Quantum Man

Jonathan Felix sat back in the chair after affixing the final electrodes to his skull. He is currently reclined in one of the most expensive private scientific investments in the world, and today was the fruition of his, and many others, efforts. The aim of the project was to open a human beings mind and allow them to perceive one of the spatial dimensions above the mediocre three.

The actual result was still a point of contestation, but it was suspected that the individual would be able to study all possible universes that could be created from his actions, and then choose the one that he wished to follow. A man whose every action would be perfect as he had already witnessed the results.

Felix had jumped at the opportunity, because he was young and headstrong. In his early twenties and brilliant in the field of quantum mechanics, he was relishing the opportunity to apply the usually theoretical aspects of his craft to a physical medium. He gave the final thumbs up to the techs behind the safety glass, and they activated the first stages of the machine. A microphone in the room relayed his words as the process started.

“If I have seen farther than others, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.” Imitation was the greatest form of flattery, he thought with a grin.

The chair reclined back until it became a flat table, and a large rotating dome lowered down to encompass his entire body. Within the dome, there was a complex crystalline structure lining the inside. He focused on the facets of the crystals, and noticed that they had started to morph, shifting in

ways his mind just could not understand. He started to feel light-headed and dizzy.

His sight was suddenly filled with explosions of light, and his body started to spasm. Reading his health signs in the control room, the engineers instantly halted the operation. A medic ran in checked the vitals of Felix, and was pleased to find a weak, yet consistent heartbeat.

Felix opened his eyes a couple of minutes later. He looked up at the doctor and suddenly jerked up as he realized where he was.

“What happened? I don’t feel any different…”

The doctor smiled and patted him on the shoulder

“Any landing you can walk away from, right?”

The doctor turned to walk away, caught his ankle on a trailing cable, tripped forwards, and cracked his forehead against the corner of the table. His head twisted to a sickening angle…

Reset

The doctor turned to walk away, caught his ankle on a trailing cable, tripped forwards, and then was grabbed from behind as Felix threw himself from the chair, stopping him inches from the table corner.

Felix collapsed and threw up. His hands shaking, he realized that he had just perceived two universes and had actively chosen the one he wanted. He smiled at the doctor.

“I did it! I can see them …I can see them all…”

Felix’s smile faded.

He now saw two new universes, both the same as far as he was aware. Suddenly, a third, a fourth, a fifth blossomed in his mind. He could suddenly see all of the possibilities that he was capable of, some he didn’t wish to see. His mind began to fracture.

Felix grabbed the medic and in an act of unnatural rage plunged his thumbs into the poor attendant's eyes…

Reset

Felix looked despairingly into the eyes of the medic and started to scream, refusing to stop even when bubbles of blood foamed around the corners of his mouth…

Reset

Felix grabbed the table leg and forcefully head-butted the corner, only achieving his goal of shattering his skull on the fourth strike…

Reset

Felix sat on the floor experiencing all the potential evil that he was physically capable of. His body shook as he moaned sobs of horror. He grabbed the collar of the medic and drew them face-to-face.

"TOO FAR…TOO FAR…" he screamed

His eyes blurred for a second, then started to turn yellow and shriveled. At the same moment his hair changed to the purest white. Felix in his final moments became aware of a magnitude of universes bearing down on him, and he would have to live through every single one. His grip slipped and his mind was lost to the abyss.

Reset

Cabin Fever

Part I: The Situation

Stranded in the middle of that colorless gray period that one gets in the deepest throes of winter, cabin fever was starting to set in. The only signs of life on the outside were the headlights of the drivers brave enough to take on the dangerous, otherwise dead, roads. Natures makeshift bridges, made up mostly of broken tree limbs, fallen trees,

and downed power lines were everywhere and posed a great threat to those stupid drivers who wanted to go Dog-knows where. Even more dangerous was all the black ice. By day it was present yet avoidable. By night it was deadly and it blended in perfectly with its environment; Black on black on black. It was like some cold, heartless chameleon out to and hell-bent on showing people their maker, or lack thereof.

Life on the inside wasn't much better. Here the only signs of life were the dancing candle flames and out own slowly beating hearts. It was as if we were all living in the colonial era, surviving by the light that emanated from the candle that cast an eerie glow. There was nothing but such to keep us company. We were all in the darkest shadows cast by a town-wide blackout and it had been like that for days. Perhaps as many as two weeks had gone by since the last pulse of electricity had faded.

For me, Spencer Princeton, the small town of North Brookfield seemed unreachable from the threshold of my front door. The ethereal blackness that covered the whole town was so alien. There was a mysterious, omnipresent hostility to it. I said goodbye to my family who, understandably so, had left me in charge of looking over the house while they looked for a shelter that wasn't filled to capacity. As soon as they faded into the night I knew I was alone.

Cut off from the rest of the world there was nothing to do but write and read. In the deepest pits of the realm of horror I could only lay still

and have fantasies of my darkest dreams, bursting through some psychic wall into reality. There were whispers within the crackles of fire: Demons within the shadows. Dancing. Enticing me.

Part II: Paranoia

That night I had the most horrible nightmare as sleep dominated over my physical and mental will. In my dream I saw nothing other than the decay and rot brought on by some worldwide disaster: Some unknown, apocalyptic cataclysm. From within the deepest dungeons inside my mind, I envisioned myself walking the dark streets of my town, which sat dormant and days dead, past all the blackened houses, all the store fronts that were left only to the stray cats to rule, and past the rotting corpses that littered the street. In my most natural calm I sidestepped and stepped over the bodies of people I once knew. In this alien world it was only I and the dead to keep me morbid company. In a blinding flash of light and a deafening burst of sound the dream world is brought back to light. Brought back to life. I watched in awe as the dead stood up in a flurry of stiff, cracking, primitive movement like a butterfly flapping its wings in front of a stop-motion camera. Completely unaware of me they all began to partake in an orgy of life of sorts. They lived through death in the most macabre way. The walking dead mobbed the streets and marched, en masse, into oblivion and into the darkness beyond.

I wake up and feel even deader than the walking corpses. Plunged into darkness deeper

than my dream, a sudden, inexplicable fear washed over me. Paralyzed with fear I sat, unwillingly, and let my eyes adjust to the darkness. I looked over and felt so stupid as the realization hits me that the candles went out while I was asleep. I got up to find the matches and a new terror crawled up the nape of my neck.

Not able to shake the feeling of being watched I made haste to get into the kitchen. Checking over my shoulders as I went, I expected to be confronted by some unspeakable terror stalking me from behind. The shadows played with my psyche and horrifying demons formed out of the anonymous shadows that mercilessly enveloped the house. The shadows reached out to me. They spoke to me. They beckoned to me.

I found the matches that would deliver me from the darkness and keep me safe. Keep me alive. As I walked alone in my house I saw from the corners of my eyes the shadows retreating to the corners and creases created by the walls. Always surrounded, my heart rate accelerated as I turned to keep the demons at bay, in turn making myself vulnerable. With my flame dancing wildly I could think of nothing other than how, with every more I made, I'd run the risk of the flame blowing out. Then I'd be really fucked.

Laying on the couch in a fetal position and sometimes twitching as the whispers grew louder and louder, I gave up on resisting the beckoning calls of the living blackness within the shadows. Still continuing to increase in volume the voices

rose to a grand crescendo, nearly screaming into my ears. My head was in a vise of noise and the clamp was pressing against my temple, ready to crush my skull at the slightest change in decibel level. Then, as suddenly as the nose started it stopped.

Part III: The Call

Intrigued and relieved at the sudden peace that befell the house, I propped my head up with a couple of pillows. With my head up and my ears perked an incessant ringing in my ears developed. The noise came at one-second intervals. Once Mississippi ring two Mississippi ring three Mississippi ring. Jesus Christ it was the phone. The power grid must have gone back online while I was in the grip of... some mental breakdown. Slowly making my way up the stairs the phone's ring grew louder ever so gradually. Walking down the hall the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as if acting as the sentries against some unknown adversary. I passed by rooms filled only by dusty furniture, the darkness, and the unspeakable evils that had been plaguing me. The demons were in my house and there was no denying it. The thought of sharing my home with these beasts, only to be tormented day after day, deeply disturbed me. Despite my state of shear terror I casually walked down the hallway at a slow pace so as to keep my calm and not attract attention to myself. In front of the home library I stood at the threshold debating whether or not to answer the phone. Taking the step in I could almost feel the shadows caressing me. A sense of weightlessness came over me as if I was suspended in some ethereal dream... again. I

walked toward the desk on which the phone sat and, with my hand mere inches over the receiver I stood still as if waiting for something to happen. I picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" I asked.

Nothing. The only sound that came out was the subliminal humming of dead air.

"Hello?!" I demanded as I became more and more irate.

Nothing. Then... in an explosion of sound that almost made me drop the phone, the sound of static and unintelligible rambling deafened and dazed me temporarily. The static died down to a low rumble almost instantly but the phantom caller speaking in strange tongues still "spoke" as loud as "he" did just seconds ago. From under the noises I could hear "You and me" being repeated over and over again, "You and me"... just "You and me".

The ultimate realization hit me like a cement truck. The power wasn't back on. When I walked down the hall and through the house not a single light flashed. Random times did not blink on and off the faces of the electronic clocks. I wanted to throw up. It felt like a brick wall had just jumped me. The phone rang again. I feared picking it up. I did so nonetheless. Nothing. Static. Tongues.

"You and me".

I didn't bother putting the receiver back on the hook. I turned to walk out of the room and admit defeat. No dice. The door to the library slammed shut

in my face. With a surreal calm, depressed, stoicism I tried the door know. To my surprise it opened without any problems. I did not want to exit the room though. I waited for someone to come up the stairs and face me. I waited to see someone at the end of the hall suddenly materialize. I waited to feel the icy hand of death come up from behind and wrap themselves around my throat. No such thing happened.

Part IV: Visions

In front of me the hall stretched in length as if I'd been walking for miles on end and suddenly stopped. It stretched and at the end a black void materialized from the collective shadows congealing into one mass like a blood clot obstructing an artery. In an instant everything snapped back to where it had once been. Then the doors, that were just seconds before ajar, started violently slamming open and closed by themselves. It was as loud and violent as any twenty-one-gun-salute. From the darkness of the threshold of the doors I could see faces, blacker still, peeking out whenever the doors opened. Open, face, slam shut, and repeat. The whole ordeal was like some fucked up, sadistic, psychotic, demonic whack-a-mole game that lasted for what seemed like hours. After an unbearably long diminuendo the entire situation halted, as if someone stopped time itself in its tracks.

My heart was pounding in my and my blood was pumping as fast as possible. I jumped up to the door and quickly closed it behind me. I was not going out

into that hallway even if my life depended on it. The adrenaline was coursing my veins and I hardly let out a pep as a figure suddenly materialized outside of the second story window. Staring through me with eyes that were almost invisible to my naked eye, I watched as the being, darker than the night itself, back up and repeatedly rammed into the windowpane trying to break through. I guess I would leave the library after all.

Running through the hallway, constantly looking over my shoulder to see if anything was giving me chase, I quickly turned a sharp right and descended down the stairs carefully placing my steps as to not fall down. It wasn't so hard. Anyone so uncoordinated as to fall down a flight of stairs surely deserves to die. At the bottom of the staircase I was face to face with another horrifying entity. Its face and palms were pressed up against the glass which made it look like a bloated, boorish, beast. Anything other than its face and hands were invisible when put against the night outside. Its eyes were as black and soulless as its skin was pale. A disturbingly wide grin revealed teeth that were a disgustingly rotted mix of greens, yellows, and blacks. Its short, quick and shallow breath instantly appeared on the cold glass and almost as rapidly disappeared.

I speedily turned on my right heel and sprinted down the first floor hallway past windows which were occupied by similarly terrifying monsters. I stop as I almost run into a wall. Feeling all of their eyes on me I slowly turn to face the beasts. Every

single one of them looks at me with a primal, greedy, ravenous hunger that chilled me down to the marrow. Everywhere I moved their eyes and their eyes only would follow. I screamed and they found sadistic delight in my suffering. Their breath fogged up the glass as the demons breathed more and more rapidly. Their fists and palms hammered against the glass as they drool and rave and chant as they awaited their prey's surrender.

Part V: The Nightmare Ends

Drowning in noise and shear terror I closed my eyes and block my ears and scream. Above my shrill cries I hear a humming. A brilliant radiance burns through my tightly closed eyelids. I opened my eyes to see nothing but pure whiteness and, as my sight adjusted, nothing beyond the windows. The power is back on. The lights are all on and for the first time in days the clocks tell the time. I sighed a long breath of relief. I relished in the light. Then with the return of electric life the return of my family followed in close suit.

Not telling anyone of my ordeal I walked into the living room and shut off the lights happily anticipating the comfortable flow of the television. As the light goes out my jaw dropped as all the demonic horrors congregated around the living room windows. I was pale and frozen by fear. My parents looked at me and then outside the window and asked...

"What do you see? There's nothing out there."

White With Red

A man went to a hotel and walked up to the front desk to check in. The woman at the desk gave him his key and told him that on the way to his room, there was a door with no number that was locked and no one was allowed in there. She explained that it was a storeroom, and that it was out of bounds. She reminded him of this several times before allowing him upstairs. So he followed the instructions of the woman at the front desk, going straight to his room, and going to bed. However the insistence of the woman had piqued his curiosity, so the next night he walked down the hall to the door and tried the handle. Sure enough it was locked. He bent down and looked through the wide keyhole. Cold air passed through it, chilling his eye.

What he saw was a hotel bedroom, like his, and in the corner was a woman whose skin was incredibly pale. She was leaning her head against the wall, facing away from the door. He stared in confusion for a while, was this a celebrity? The owner’s daughter? He almost knocked on the door, out of curiosity, but decided not to. As he was still looking, the woman turned sharply and he jumped back from the door, hoping she would not suspect he had been spying on her. He crept away from the door and walked back to his room. The next day, he returned to the door and looked through the wide keyhole. This time, all he saw was redness. He couldn’t make anything out besides a distinct red color, unmoving. Perhaps the inhabitants of the room knew he was spying the night before, and had blocked the keyhole with

something red. He felt embarrassed that he had made the woman so uncomfortable, and hoped she had not made a complaint with the woman on the front desk.

At this point he decided to consult her for more information. After some gentle quizzing and the promise that the explanation would go no further than him she finally said "Well, I might as well tell you the story of what happened in that room. A long time ago, a man murdered his wife in there, we find that even now, whomever stays there gets very uncomfortable. But these people were not ordinary. They were white all over, except for their eyes, which were red."

Fire

I am followed by fire.

It sounds really, really weird, I know, but it's true. Every house, every apartment I've ever lived in has burned to the ground. Even stranger—it's predictable. If I lived somewhere for six years, six years after I move out it goes up in flames. It's not exact, but it's close, usually accurate to within two or three months.

It's true. I'm not sure when I noticed the pattern for the first time, but it's always been there. When I was just a kid, right after I was born, my family lived in an old house behind my grandmother's house. We were there until I was two, when we moved. I remember visiting my grandmother's at four, watching the smoldering

embers of the little house and the curling smoke rising into the air. Old wiring from the 50's finally gave out.

From the shack, we moved to a farm. We weren't well off enough to own it or anything, but we did run it for the local doctor. The farmhouse wasn't that big, and most of my childhood memories come from the cozy, family setting it engendered. Here, I remember Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays. I think of it whenever I think of "back home." We lived there from when I was two until I was nine, when the doctor we worked for died. At fifteen, it burned, an old tree struck by lightning sparking off the blaze.

The third house I lived in was the second to burn to the ground. We only lived there for around two years, so it happened when I was thirteen. It was an old house, a very old house. What I remember most was its shape. We called them "shotgun" houses, because you could fire a shotgun from one end and it would pass all the way through to the other. One room after another, all in a straight line, built as needed. It was, honestly, very old and dry. I'm not surprised that the heating stove in the front room sprung a leak on the tenants after us.

Other than where I'm at now, the only place left is my parent's current house. When they asked me why I was moving all my stuff stored in the basement out, I didn't have the heart to tell them, so I made up some excuse about having my old books and stuff closer to college. I didn't know what else to say.

When I turned nineteen, I moved out of my parent's house, and went to college. Before renting the house I live in now, I stayed in an apartment in the city. I shared it with a couple of assholes that seemed nice enough before I moved in. Everyone knows the type. Won't pay their bills on time. Eats whatever they can lay hands on. It got worse and worse until I made up my mind. When I'd finally had enough, I left. We were four months into a one-year lease. Now I'm just keeping an eye on the news. Waiting for the sparks. A gas leak, a stray match… Sooner or later, they'll burn.

They always burn.

I Don't See Him Anymore

I used to see him often. Well, I guess I shouldn't say him, more like… it. Then I moved away, to another state, another city. I don't see it anymore. Not physically, though it creeps through my mind in its swooping, slinking way. It goes high up in the air one moment, then sliding across the ground the next, over and over and over, its limbs propelling itself forward.

The mere thought sends ice-cold shivers running down my spine. It used to watch me, but it can't anymore. At least, I don't think it can. I wouldn't be surprised, however, to wake in the early hours of the day when the sky is still dark, and look to my window to see those eyes, those teeth, see it smile that awful smile. I hope I'm dead before that day arises. I

hope I've seen the last of that monster.

When I was little, I lived in a small suburban neighborhood. It isn't the kind you're probably thinking of—big, white, uniform houses all lined up in perfect rows with green lawns and two garage doors. No, my neighborhood was much older. It was built sometime in the fifties and every house looked different, but most had started to fall apart. The people living there were hardworking and honest for the most part, and their long, hard lives showed on their faces. No one really talked to anyone else. That was one of the only things I didn't like about that neighborhood. My mother always said the neighbors just liked to keep to themselves, that they had nothing very important to say, anyway. Looking back on it now, I think they did have something important to say: Something very, very important.

I saw it for the first time when I was eight years old, during the summer. It was very hot that season, unusually so compared to all the summers I've had since then, so I'd stayed inside most the morning. Then, after lunch, my father hooked up the sprinkler we used for our garden in our backyard. I excitedly got into play clothes and rushed outside, into the blinding sun. Those were the days, those innocent days in the sun where I played without a care. I had no idea I would soon be missing them. So, I was outside, running and laughing and jumping through the cool spray of water… when I saw it. At first I didn't notice it—it was just a rustle in the bushes. Then it was the crack of a

branch and I looked up. Something…s omething dark moved through those leaves. Something as black as midnight, yet it shimmered when the sun hit it. It ran--or galloped, to this day I'm still not sure what to call it—from a small forest behind my house, leapt over my neighbor's fence, and disappeared from my view. I was curious, so I chased it.

The pavement burned my feet, but I didn't care. I watched, along with a few other neighborhood children, as the creature swept in and out of the shadows of trees, making its way down the street. It was large, probably about eight feet tall if it stood upright, though it never did. Instead, it stayed hunched over, its hind legs curled up at its sides, the knees protruding grotesquely past its torso. Large, white, curled claws grew from bony feet and long, slender fingers. Its arms were gnarled, the joints bulging under twisted muscle and skin. Skin that was black and rubbery stretched thin over whatever bones the beast had. It caved in at odd places and almost looked as if… it were rotting. Still, when it crept through the sun, patches glistened gray and blue, as if it were made of some kind of foreign glass.

Then there was its face. The skin was the same, stretched over an oblong oval skull that jutted out in the back. Its eyes were sunken deep within its head, large and round and hollow. They glowed a weird white-yellow; one I'm sure doesn't have a name to this day. Really, it wasn't even glowing. It was more of a pulsating, ever-present light that seemed

to come straight from some nonexistent soul deep within the monster's core. It always seemed to smile. Its mouth was stretched, like its skin, far across its face. You know the expression, "grinning ear to ear"? It was literal in this case, each corner reaching each side of its face, where ears would have been if it had any. Within this smile were two rows of pure white teeth, long and sharp. In fact, each tooth was so long, it could never close its mouth. The sharp tips just clacked against each other as it skulked around, waving its head slowly from side to side, as if sniffing something in the air. I use to find this silly, since it had no nose. Now the thought terrifies me.

We kids just watched it in a sort of dazed amazement, never having seen something like it before. I suppose I thought it was just some species I had yet to learn about in school—I wish that's all it had been. Then our parents called us back inside for dinner and we grudgingly obeyed, not wanting to get in trouble. I'm not sure about the other kids, but I never quite forgot about the creature I'd seen. I got preoccupied with other things, sure, but its image was always in the back of my mind. It was burning there, waiting for me to remember it late at night while I tried to drift off to sleep. It got its wish.

That night I was lying in bed with my covers pulled up to my chin, despite how hot I was. The nightlight across the room barely gave me comfort from the thoughts of ghouls and ghosts hiding in my closet or under my bed. Then the beast's image

slipped into my thoughts. I gripped the covers. It hadn't scared me before, yet I'd been mere feet away from it. But now, after having the image sit in my mind all day, my brain registering its unworldly appearance, I started to fear it. It was bad, and I knew that now.

Then I heard a tap. I froze. Another tap. I didn't dare move. Then there was another and another and another. It was at my window. I could hear its long claws scrape across the glass, hear its razor-sharp fangs as they clicked together…I could hear its breathing. Heavy, husky, in and out, in and out it went. Finally, I could no longer bear it. I tore my eyes from my night-light and gazed through the dark room towards my window. It smiled when it saw me. An impossibly huge grin that split its face in two, white teeth glistening with saliva, gleaming eyes seeming to pull every fear from my conscious and unconscious to the surface. I screamed. By the time my parents rushed into my room, it was gone, no traces of its existence left behind. They said it was just a nightmare.

It wasn't just a nightmare.

I never saw it in the daytime again, but I saw it every night. After a week I stopped screaming, I just cried silently in my bed. Then, after another week, I stopped crying. It knew I was scared; I wasn't going to give it the satisfaction of seeing me tremble. It wasn't until it found the lock on my window that I was truly terrified. I'll never forget the clunk the lock made when it had been moved for the first time in years, or the waning screech of

the window as it slid open, or the heavy breathing at my bedside. I'll never forget those eyes as they gazed at me from beyond my covers. It knew I was scared. It thrived on that.

It wouldn't leave me alone. Everyone says I went crazy, but I didn't! It just wouldn't leave me alone! I hardly ever slept, my hair started to fall out and I always looked tired. My parents put me here, in this "psychiatric hospital". It's a nut house, that's what it is! I'm not crazy! It's been years-- years. The nightmares still happen when I do sleep, so they keep me here. I suppose I like it better this way, though. After all, the monster can't get me here. You know, the funny thing is… I can't even remember where I use to live. I can't remember the state or the city… I can't even remember… the country.

The Smiling Man

About five years ago I lived downtown in a major city in the US. I've always been a night person, so I would often find myself bored after my roommate, who was decidedly not a night person, went to sleep. To pass the time, I used to go for long walks and spend the time thinking.

I spent four years like that, walking alone at night, and never once had a reason to feel afraid. I always used to joke with my roommate that even the drug dealers in the city were polite. But all of that changed in just a few minutes of one evening.

It was a Wednesday, somewhere between one and two in the morning, and I was walking near a police patrolled park quite a ways from my apartment. It was a quiet night, even for a weeknight, with very little traffic and almost no one on foot. The park, as it was most nights, was completely empty.

I turned down a short side street in order to loop back to my apartment when I first noticed him. At the far end of the street, on my side, was the silhouette of a man, dancing. It was a strange dance, similar to a waltz, but he finished each "box" with an odd forward stride. I guess you could say he was dance-walking, headed straight for me.

Deciding he was probably drunk, I stepped as close as I could to the road to give him the majority of the sidewalk to pass me by. The closer he got, the more I realized how gracefully he was moving. He was very tall and lanky, and wearing an old suit. He danced closer still, until I could make out his face. His eyes were open wide and wild, head tilted back slightly, looking off at the sky. His mouth was formed in a painfully wide cartoon of a smile. Between the eyes and the smile, I decided to cross the street before he danced any closer.

I took my eyes off of him to cross the empty street. As I reached the other side, I glanced back... and then stopped dead in my tracks. He had stopped dancing and was standing with one foot in the street, perfectly parallel to me. He was facing me but still looking

skyward. Smile still wide on his lips.

I was completely and utterly unnerved by this. I started walking again, but kept my eyes on the man. He didn't move. Once I had put about half a block between us, I turned away from him for a moment to watch the sidewalk in front of me. The street and sidewalk ahead of me were completely empty. Still unnerved, I looked back to where he had been standing to find him gone. For the briefest of moments I felt relieved, until I noticed him. He had crossed the street, and was now slightly crouched down. I couldn't tell for sure due to the distance and the shadows, but I was certain he was facing me. I had looked away from him for no more than 10 seconds, so it was clear that he had moved fast.

I was so shocked that I stood there for some time, staring at him. And then he started moving toward me again. He took giant, exaggerated tip toed steps, as if he were a cartoon character sneaking up on someone, except he was moving very, very quickly.

I'd like to say at this point I ran away or pulled out my pepper spray or my cellphone or anything at all, but I didn't. I just stood there, completely frozen as the smiling man crept toward me.

And then he stopped again, about a car length away from me. Still smiling his smile, still looking to the sky.

When I finally found my voice, I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. What I meant to ask was, "What the fuck

do you want?!" in an angry, commanding tone. What came out was a whimper, "What the fuu…?"

Regardless of whether or not humans can smell fear, they can certainly hear it. I heard it in my own voice, and that only made me more afraid. But he didn't react to it at all. He just stood there, smiling.

And then, after what felt like forever, he turned around, very slowly, and started dance-walking away. Just like that. Not wanting to turn my back to him again, I just watched him go, until he was far enough away to almost be out of sight. And then I realized something. He wasn't moving away anymore, nor was he dancing. I watched in horror, as the distant shape of him grew larger and larger. He was coming back my way. And this time he was running.

I ran too.

I ran until I was off of the side road and back onto a better lit road with sparse traffic. Looking behind me then, he was nowhere to be found. The rest of the way home, I kept glancing over my shoulder, always expecting to see his stupid smile, but he was never there.

I lived in that city for six months after that night, and I never went out for another walk. There was something about his face that always haunted me. He didn't look drunk, and he didn't look high. He looked completely and utterly insane. And that's a very, very scary thing to see.

The Portraits

There was a hunter in the woods, who, after a long day hunting, was in the middle of an

immense forest. It was getting dark, and having lost his bearings, he decided to head in one direction until he was clear of the increasingly oppressive foliage. After what seemed like hours, he came across a cabin in a small clearing. Realizing how dark it had grown, he decided to see if he could stay there for the night. He approached, and found the door ajar. Nobody was inside. The hunter flopped down on the single bed, deciding to explain himself to the owner in the morning.

As he looked around the inside of the cabin, he was surprised to see the walls adorned by several portraits, all painted in incredible detail. Without exception, they appeared to be staring down at him, their features twisted into looks of hatred and malice. Staring back, he grew increasingly uncomfortable. Making a concerted effort to ignore the many hateful faces, he turned to face the wall, and exhausted, he fell into a restless sleep.

The next morning, the hunter awoke -- he turned, blinking in unexpected sunlight. Looking up, he discovered that the cabin had no portraits, only windows.

The Lurkers

The sun was beginning to set as he was leaving the convenient store. “Crap!” he yelled to nobody. His voice echoed across the hills. He climbed into his Cadillac, and took off into the woodlands.

It was this time of day when those things got you. It was the time of day when the sun has lowered past the horizon and

turns the sky a blood red. The shadows of the trees stretched over the narrow road. He was in such a hurry now, that he didn't check between the trees for things that weren't shadows. He turned his headlights on. The shadows were closing in, and if he didn't get home before they did, he would be risking everything.

The porch lamps could be seen from his car now. He should have felt better, but the fear of what might happen lingered at the back of his head. The driveway was surrounded with shadow. This shadow, however, was unusually dark. It kept the lamps at bay. Then, at that very moment, he saw the thing.

It was dead, really dead. Despite that, it stared at him with spiteful eyes. Then, he felt a cold sweat come over him. The thing was four or five yards from the cabin. It was crouched behind a bush, and kept its gaze on him. That was the moment when hope seemed like wishful thinking, and death seemed almost definite.

There was only one option, so he slowly reached behind the car seat and picked up his rifle. He opened up the barrel, and saw there was no ammunition. The worst was happening, and the odds weren't in his favor. He slowly opened the car door and stepped out.

He was surprised that the thing wasn't already approaching him. It was still crouched there, and remained the evil presence it was. He walked to the trunk, and cautiously pulled out his keys. The fear intensified, and he was beginning to shake. He turned the key and opened the trunk. The box of shells was at arms

length. He opened it, and loaded the gun.

Still shaking, he held up the rifle, and aimed the sights between the thing's eyes. He was beginning to pull the trigger. The voice in his head screamed "too easy." He was about to release the bullets, when the thing quickly stood up. It walked over the bush, and quickly approached him. The thing held out its arms and covered his eyes.

He woke the next morning. The sun shined through the windows of his home. He sat up in bed, and looked around. Blood was splattered all over the walls. He felt a chill. He got out of bed. There was a noise coming from a room down the hall.

He slowly walked down the corridor. The noise increased in volume, and he was really getting nervous. He made it to the bathroom door: the source of the noise. He reached for the doorknob, and opened the door.

The same figure he saw before, was hunched over the bathtub. It was chewing on a bloodied carcass. He was too frightened to move. Despite the noise he made, the thing did not move. It was still hunched over. That moment later, it stood up, and climbed out the bathroom window. He looked at the thing's meal in disgust.

Before he could run, he noticed something. The arm of the body it was eating had a ring on it. He looked closer at it, and felt a rush of horror. The ring was his.

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"Then I heard him in the hallway and on the stairs."

The Homicidal Diary

By EARL PEIRCE, JR.

What strange compulsion drove an ordinarily gentle and cultured man, on one night of each week, to roam the city streets and commit a ghastly crime?

I AM writing this account of my friend Jason Carse in the interests of both justice and psychiatry, and perhaps of demonology as well. There is no greater proof of what I relate than the sequence of murders which so recently shocked this city, the newspaper items regarding the crimes, and especially the official report of the alienists who examined Carse during his trial. I cannot expect to bring Doctor Carse back to life, for he was hanged until dead, but I do hope that this paper will offer new illumination on cases of criminal decapitation.

Justice and psychiatry are closely related, but it is difficult to recognize the judicial importance of so *outré* a subject as demonology. Yet I emphatically assert that the case of Jason Carse is irrevocably concerned with evil and dark lore such as mankind has not known since the Holy Inquisition.

One is naturally prejudiced against Carse, for even I myself, his lifelong acquaintance, was struck with repugnance when I first realized the nature of his activities, but his death on the gallows should foreclose biased reflection and permit the student to regard his case in a purely empirical light. As I am the only man in complete possession of the facts, it behooves me to give this astounding information to the world.

Jason Carse was a brilliant and respected criminologist, and at the time of his arrest he was recognized as one of the greatest students of the modern world, a fact which has made his case one of unparalleled notoriety. I was his roommate during the several years we spent in law school, and, although he shot to the pinnacle of his branch of jurisprudence while I was left to more prosaic routine, we never lost the contact which has now become so valuable. Our correspondence was frequent and regular since we were graduated, and I can say with justifiable pride that Carse respected my friendship as much as that of any other acquaintance, if not more. It was this intimacy with his personal life which has enabled me, as friend and confidant, to witness the revolting atavism which resulted in such outrageous crimes.

I obtained my first hazy acquaintance with the crimes three months ago when I received Carse's letter from Vienna. He had just discovered sensational evidence in a famous criminal case—one of recurrent human decapitation—and his consequent enthusiasm was so rabid that I was afraid the morbidity of such matters was beginning to pervert his senses. For several years I had become progressively aware of Carse's melancholic attitude, and I had often recommended that he take a vacation from criminal cases. His indefatigable enthusiasm for research was all against my advice, and he had gone relentlessly ahead to the tragic climax which my greatest fears could not have imagined. This letter from Vienna, so eager with indomitable *il faut travailler*, confirmed my suspicion that Carse had descended into the depressing rut of monomania.

When he returned to America shortly afterward I crossed the country to spend a few days with him, but he was so sickly and irritable that I could do nothing to cheer his spirits. He continually brooded over the case he had been investigating, and I should have known at that time there was a dangerous neurotic compulsion stirring in his subconscious mind. Less than a week after my departure from the city the first of the horrific head-hunting crimes was committed and the actual drama got under way. I can recall reading the sensational accounts in the newspapers and my anxious fear that this fresh display of criminal perversion would excite Carse into a state nearing hysteria. I telegraphed him that same day, begging his refusal to bother with the case and requesting that he come to visit me. His reply was swift and brief; he had already commenced his investigations of the head-hunting crime and nothing on earth could deter him from his set course. Knowing him as I did, I could do nothing but hope that the Head-hunter would be swiftly captured and the case brought to a finish. It was anunpleasant shock, therefore, when I read—exactly one week later—that a second and identical crime had been committed.

EVEN in my own city, three thousand miles from the center of the crimes, there was wild confusion at the announcement of this second spectacular murder. The reader may recall the international effects of the infamous "Ripper" crimes which terrified

London a few decades ago and he will understand how rapidly the Head-hunter's fame spread through crime-conscious America. Both murders were made particularly mysterious because of the disappearance of the victims' heads. I knew the damaging influence which these doings would produce upon Carse, for he had always been interested in decapitations, and his thesis at the University of Graz had been based upon the mad career of Emil Drukker, the Head-hunter of Cologne.

I wrote again to Carse and begged him to abandon his studies in these new murders, but, as before, his response was cold and discouraging. There was a wild and almost fanatical tone in his letter which was indicative of his obsessed mind, and an ugly premonition occurred to me that this would be the breaking-point of his career.

The third and fourth murders, so horribly identical with the first two, came about at weekly intervals, and the city was in the grip of strangling terror. There was no rime or reason for the crimes, and yet the diabolical precision of the murderer seemed to indicate he was a madman of uncanny intelligence. In all four cases his victims were vagabonds and people of the lowest order. In none of the murders had the victim been assaulted, but the head had disappeared, seemingly for ever. There was not a shred of evidence pointing to the solution, and, except that the notice knew him to be a homicidal maniac, there was not a single person in a city of several millions whom they could call the murderer. Far worse than the four murders committed was the belief that they would continue week after week to an indeterminable conclusion.

I left for the city by plane on the evening of the discovery of the fifth victim, and during the trans-country flight I read Carse's own statement in the *Metropolitan Gazette* citing the crime as an atavistic expression of animalism. The fact that two of the five victims had been men, according to Carse's theory, belied the popular suspicion that the criminal was a homicidal sadist. Carse expressed the belief that the murderer was in the grip of some inherent savagery, and that the ghastly murders would continue until he wore himself out by the sheer expenditure of energy.

I reached the city shortly after sundown, and at once I felt the awful tension which had settled upon everyone in it. Men and women moved furtively, airport officials and police examined every strange face with cold and scrutinizing suspicion, and even my taxi-driver, a small mousy man, kept his fear-laden dark eyes continually reverting to the mirror as he whirled me through the slight evening traffic. I was surprized, therefore, in view of this mutual distrust, to find that Jason Carse, a veteran criminalist, had discharged all of his servants and was living alone in his grim house behind a barricaded door.

The most unpleasant shock was the unaccountably cold manner in which Carse received my visit, and his positive annoyance that I had forced myself so unexpectedly upon him. He would not explain why he had discharged his servants, nor the secluded life he was now leading, but there was little difficulty in realizing the fatiguing effects which these recent crimes had pronounced upon him. He was virtually a stranger as we met in the hallway and shook hands.

"I wish you'd go to a hotel," he said bluntly. "I don't want anyone here." But I didn't go to a hotel. I told him flatly that there was no other course open to me but to stay and take care of him; for obviously he wasn't taking care of himself, and his dismissal of the household help had precipitated a needless burden on his already over-laden shoulders. He needed food, for he was thin to emaciation, and I made him dress at once and accompany me to a restaurant where I saw that he ate a decent meal. I then led him to the theater, a particularly lively musical comedy, and kept him in his seat until the curtain had fallen. But

my efforts seemed of no avail, as he was continually depressed and absorbed in his own reflections. That night before retiring he came to my room and again asked me to leave.

"It's for your own good," he said with strange harshness. "For God's sake believe what I say!"

FOR the next several days I watched him sink lower and lower into despondency of so contagious a nature that I felt the insufferable pangs of it myself. He worked late at night on the murder cases, referring constantly to autopsy protocols and police memoranda, and more than once I saw him reading his Bible. On several occasions he visited the county morgue and examined the remains of the Head-hunter's victims, and following each such visit he lapsed into a state of mental and physical agitation that exhausted him within a few hours.

The nights were almost unbearable, and I would lie awake for hours listening to the mumbles and moans which came from his room, oftentimes distinguishing such words as "God forbid it! God forbid it!" and frequently he would scream the word "Head-hunter." There was no doubt that Carse had delved too deeply into this case, and that hour by hour he was descending into the clutch of a dangerous neurosis.

During my stay with him I engaged several servants, but he discharged them, and I was unable to reconcile him to my point of view. His resentment of my visit became more acute as the days passed, and I was beginning to fear that he would forcibly eject me

It was easy to explain this increased irritability, for I myself, as well as every soul in the city, was nervously awaiting the next prowl of the Head-hunter, and in it I recognized more fuel for the fire that was burning Carse" s reason. He was waiting for the fatal Monday night as a man waits for his doom, and each hour found him closer to a mental attack. On Sunday afternoon I discovered him in my room packing my luggage.

"You must go now," he said. "I appreciate your interest in me, but now you must go—you must!"

The tremor of anxiety in his voice nearly convinced me that he was right, but doggedly I clung to my set purpose to save him in spite of himself. I could not leave him alone in face of the developments which would occur sometime between then and Tuesday morning, and I told him so.

"Fool!" he exploded; "I can do nothing with you. Stay if you wish—but it's on your own head!"

The irony of that final statement, whether intentional or not, is something I shall remember to my grave. I don't think that Carse meant it literally—*on my own bead*—but I was unable to shake his words out of my ears, and throughout the night and the following day they hung about me like a dirge.

Carse did not sleep at all that Sunday night, but paced up and down in his study while a fierce, alarming expression hardened on his features. Nor could I sleep, for his continued pacing tore my nerves to shreds, and I spent the night alternately in my own room and at the partly open doorway of the library, where I was able to watch him in secrecy. Several times I saw him bend over a small book and study it with the intent regard of a disciple, and each time that he referred to a certain page he pounded his fist on the desk and cried to himself: "God forbid! God forbid!"

I should have realized what he meant. I should have known and been prepared, but how blind my friendship made me to the horrific implication of those repeated words!

Monday came and went in a slow drizzle of rain which only added to the somber quiet of the city, and as the evening approached and wore on I felt myself caught in the irresistible tide of fearful anticipation which warned of the sixth appearance of the Head-hunter. The streets were deserted throughout the day, and with but few exceptions the only pedestrians were police officers, who now traveled in pairs or squads. The evening papers were brutally frank in predicting that before dawn a sixth headless corpse would be discovered, and this expectation was shared by all.

Carse was at home all day and refused to answer the telephone or to allow me to answer it for him. He ate sparingly, with his same preoccupation, and, contrary to my expectations, he appeared to have lapsed into a state akin to normality, like a man who contemplates a preordained and inexorable occurrence.

At six o'clock he came to me, ghastly haggard and thin, and again asked me to leave his house, but I refused this zero-hour request. He shrugged and went back to his study. I watched him for a while and saw that he was studying that queer little book which so deeply affected him, and I again heard him utter those despairing words: "God forbid! God forbid!"

I WENT to bed at a little after ten and tried to sleep, but the city-wide excitement seeped into my room and kept me tossing from the thrusts of nightmares. At midnight Carse came up and stopped just outside my door, obviously listening to determine whether I was asleep. The silence was uncanny for a moment; then I heard a sharp metallic clicking and he went on to his room. After he had closed his door, I swept my sheet aside and went to my own door. Carse had locked it from the outside!

I called to him for an explanation of this conduct, but he either didn't hear me or chose to ignore my requests, for the house remained grimly silent. Returning to bed, I managed somehow to doze off.

At two o'clock I was awakened by the sound of someone's walking in the hallway. I sat bolt-upright in bed and heard the unmistakable approach of footsteps coming down the corridor from Carse's bedroom. The tread was stealthy and determined, and as it drew closer to my room I was conscious of a cold mask of sweat clinging to my face, because the footsteps did not sound like those of Jason Carse!

The feeling hit me and hit me again until T was left stunned with the horror of it. It did not sound like Carse! But if it was not Carse, who was it?

I wanted to call out his name, yet I felt, with some indefinable sense, that the treader in the hall was unaware that I was in the house, and for that reason it could not have been Carse. I was afraid to make an outcry, and I sat stricken with dread as the footsteps went past my door descending the stairs. A moment later there was a noise of cutlery being moved in the kitchen, and the front door opened and closed.

As it had come, that strange prescience vanished and I tried to reason out what I had heard. Of course the man was Carse; who could it have been save him, for were we not alone in the house? I sat for hours on the bed working up a determination to shake the truth out of him when he returned, but shortly after four o'clock my strength ran out of me and I shook with fear as I heard that awful ghost-like tread ascending the stairs. My heart beat wildly when the person reached my door and twisted the knob to enter.

One thought flashed through my head: Thank God the door was locked! The terrible feeling that it was not Carse came back upon me, and I sat motionless as I listened to the sounds from outside. Foe a moment there were no sounds from the intruder, but I did hear a faint tap-tap-tap like that of a liquid falling to the wooden floor. In a minute the knob was released and the footsteps continued down the hall to Carse's room.

Any attempt to explain my thoughts as I sat smoking throughout the night would only add to the confusion of these revelations. They were not sane and rational thoughts, but rather strange suggestions and premonitions. I thought myself to be in the presence of a tremendous evil.

In the morning Carse was up early, and moved back and forth in the corridor with strange industry. He was crying, for his sobs came disturbingly to my ears, and once I heard him descend into the cellar and there was a faint digging sound as he performed some outlandish task. Then I heard him in the hallway and on the stairs. I heard the splashing of water and the sound of scrubbing.

I pounded on the door for him to let me out, but it was not until nearly noon that he finished his chores and finally opened my door. He was stooped and fatigued, and without bothering to return my amenities, he turned away and went to his study.

I WENT into the hallway and noticed, as I had surmised, that the floor showed signs of recent and vigorous cleaning. I walked down to his room and looked in, not surprized to notice that here, too, was the unmistakable evidence of scrubbing. I knew there was only one more thing to do; I must go down to the cellar and unearth what he had buried there!

The horrible truth had been dawning upon me for hours, and when I came face to face with him in the kitchen at the head of the cellar stairs I looked squarely into his eyes with the full realization that Jason Carse was the Headhunter.

I was not frightened—not for my personal safety, at any rate—but a sensation of sickening horror went through me as I looked into his tired face and understood that at last he had fallen into the cesspool which had tormented him since early years. The words of the coroner came back into my ears: "He is a madman of uncanny intelligence," and I knew that he knew I recognized him for what he was.

The awful silence of our conflicting glances was unbroken for several seconds, and then words came uncontrollably from my mouth and I managed to snap that nerve-cracking tension.

"What's in the cellar?" I cried. "What have you buried there?"

"If anything happens to you," he returned, ignoring my questions, "I am not to be blamed. 1 warned you in time to get away from this house. What do you think is in the cellar?"

"I dare to suggest there are six small graves."

An ugly smirk went across his face and he cast a glance at the cellar door.

"You always were too smart for your own good," he said softly. "Knowledge can be dangerous."

"How did you think you could get away with it?" I screamed, only too well aware of his implication. "My God, Carse! Six human heads!"

His jaw hardened and he took a menacing step toward me. Then suddenly he stopped, a queer tragic expression coming over his face. He put his hand to his eyes as if to blot out some horrible memory.

"I know, I know!" he cried hysterically. "Six heads—six human heads! Do you think I planned six heads?"

A shudder went through him and he buried his face in both hands and sobbed like a child.

My personal fear gradually subsided as I watched this remorseful quiescence which had come upon him. I realized that he had passed the emotional climax of his crime, and that he was now suffering that terrible reaction which must haunt and terrify all criminals. I took this advantage to gain control of him, for there was no way of determining when his madness would flare again.

"There is only one course open for me," I told him soberly. "I must turn you over to the police. Things like this must be stopped."

He pulled his hands away from his face and stared at me, his eyes fired with dread. "No, no!" he screamed. "Don't give me away. Please, in the name of God, don't give me away! I am sick, I tell you! I am not responsible!"

A feeling of helpless pity went through me as he sank to his knees in hysterical imploration, but I steeled myself against him. The man was mad and dangerous. He must be stamped out without mercy.

"There are asylums——" I began.

"You cannot!" he cried. "You know what they do in asylums. *I* know! Please help me. I am not responsible. It is the book—*the book*."

"What book?"

"Drukker—that diary! Can't you see what it has done to me? It's eaten into my brain until I am mad. It's driven me like a slave until I have no other bidding. It taught me how to do these things. It makes me do them."

I pulled him to his feet and shook him unmercifully. He was crying and retching, a pitiable and horrible sight to look upon.

"You are talking irrationally," I cried. "I am your friend and I want to help you, but my first duty is the public welfare. There are six human heads buried in your cellar. There must be no more."

"No more?" he laughed shrilly and threw up both his hands to indicate the count of ten. "No more, you say? There will be ten more before it stops. Ten more! That's what the book says!"

"You want ten?" I demanded incredulously, struck numb by his callousness. "You want ten more to add to those six? Carse, Carse! They are not cabbages you are counting; they are human heads. Do you think I am a fiend to let this continue? No; it must end—it must end on the gallows."

"*He* died on the gallows!"

"He? Whom are you talking about? Try to make sense, Carse. I am your friend; trust me."

"I am talking of Emil Drukker—the man who taught me how to do these things. He is responsible for them, not I. He is the one to hang for them. Dig him out of his grave and

hang him again!"

I PUSHED him gently into a chair, for his collapse seemed imminent. Spittle was running from his mouth, and his retching continued in spasms that shook him to his teeth.

"I am your friend," I told him again. "I want to help you, but you must get control of yourself. Why do you say you are not responsible? What drove you to commit these crimes?"

He looked at me searchingly and his eyes cleared. He swallowed a mass of incoherent words in an effort to master himself; then his hand pressed over mine.

"You are right; I must get control of myself," he said. "I have done some horrible things which can never be forgiven, but I swear to you that I have not done them intentionally. And I am not mad as you think. I am in the power of that book. I am the puppet of a horror that has outlived all natural deaths."

A feeling of relief passed over me as I saw him settle into a state of rational observation. I hoped it would last, for not three yards away from him, lying on top of the kitchen table, was a seven-inch butcher knife. My only hope was to preserve his state by permitting him to tell his story, and in that way to persuade him to accept the inevitable consequences of his crimes. I drew up a chair beside his own, yet kept myself alert to ward off any Junge he might make for the knife.

"What is this horror which has mastered you?" I asked in an effort to gain his confidence. "And what is this book?"

"I told you about it in my letter from Vienna six weeks ago. I told you I had discovered a rare book—an awful and compelling book. It was the diary of Emil Drukker."

"Where did you get it?"

He cast a swift glance about the room, then suddenly his eyes fell upon the butcher knife. I saw him tense, saw his lips twitch under the lash of a horrible temptation.

"Carse, tell me about it!" I yelled, to distract him. "Where did you get the book?"

He pulled his eyes away from the knife and let them burn into my face. For a moment, undecided, he was silent; then his brows straightened and he leaned forward in his chair.

"Do you remember my Graz thesis? It was based upon the life of Emil Drukker in an effort to explain what impulse drove him to cut off human heads. It was a good thesis, one of the best on the subject, and it brought a lot of response from criminologists all over the world. About six months after it was published I received a letter from a man who was once Emil Drukker's personal servant. He was living in Cologne right close to the old Drukker castle, and he wanted to see me. He told me that he knew the Drukker crimes from the first to the last—sixteen of them.

"So I went, of course, and met this man, who was small and old, with an obsession for Emil Drukker. He talked for a long time, and then he handed me the diary and said it explained more vividly than I could ever imagine the impulse which prompted Drukker's recurrent human decapitations. He told me that Drukker had written each entry while the memory of the crime was still fresh in his mind. It was a terrible book to read, he warned, and unless I had the intellectual strength of a mental Hercules I would never forgive myself for having opened it.

"Naturally I was too excited to heed his warning, and on that same night I took the book away with me. I promised to return it to him when I had finished, but he wouldn't accept this plan. Instead he said that he would come and get the book when I was through. It was a mysterious business and should have told me to expect no good to come of it. I asked him how he would know when I had finished with the book, and I shall never forget that evil smile and disdainful shrug of his response.

"'I shall know well enough when I read the newspapers,* he told me. 'This rime it will be six or seven—in about four months from now.'

"Do you understand what he meant by those words? He knew what would happen! And yet he let me carry that book away with me! In the name of God, what kind of a man is he?"

"Why didn't you destroy the book?" I demanded of him.

"I couldn't! It was too fascinating, too powerful to destroy. I read that book with the reverence of an ecclesiastic until I knew every word between the covers, and the whole ghastly parade of Drukker's sixteen murders passed before my eyes like figures on a stage. Ten weeks ago I began to have nightmares that reconstructed the crimes of Drukker, going chronologically from Number One to Number Sixteen, then beginning all over again.

"'When I returned to America seven weeks ago I still had the book with me, and the contents were so deeply engraved on my brain that I could think of nothing else. Day and night I thought about it, until at length I found myself actually imagining how I would go about emulating his crimes. Then I began to get the horrible impulse to fondle a butcher knife—Drukker used a butcher knife, you know!—and more than once I was struck with the scarcely resistible urge to cut off someone's head. It didn't matter whose head—but just a head!"

"Easy, Carse!" I cried with a wary glance at the kitchen table. "Tell me the rest, but don't excite yourself. What happened then?"

He slid back in a sort of stupor, shook his head several times, then passed his hand across his eyes in a gesture of despair.

"You ought to know damned well what happened if you were listening at your door last night. Six weeks ago I went to bed and dreamed horribly. I had just finished reading the first confession in the diary—some strange impulse made me read *that* confession and no other—and in my sleep I saw a human head staring at me. It was a cruel, Teutonic head, and I knew that it was Emil Drukker's head hanging in a gallows rope. Then he smiled at me; a horrible, vivid, real smile, and the head vanished. From then on, for how long I cannot say, I sat as a spectator and watched the complete action of Drukker's Number One.

"I saw Drukker leave his house and walk down a dark street with no other illumination than a few scattered electric lights. I tried to imagine how they were electric lights, for they had only gas in his day, but nevertheless they were modern lights, and the street looked like the street in front of my own house. He walked about ten blocks; then he saw a woman standing on a street corner. There wasn't another soul in sight. He crept closer to her, then drew out his butcher knife, and hid it in the folds of his coat—a coat which looked strangely like my own wind-breaker. He first tried to talk with the woman, but she was not interested; so he pulled out the knife and brought it sweeping down across her throat. The

blood spurted like a fountain and overran Drukker's hand, but he only laughed and pushed the woman to the ground, then knelt over her and began a horrible sawing movement with his knife. When he had finished, he drew a towel from his pocket and wrapped the head tightly to prevent the blood from trailing him home. He came back the same way and entered the house, and at the foot of the stairs he unwrapped the towel and held the thing only by its hair as he climbed the steps. The last thing I saw or heard was the blood dripping on each step as he ascended to the upper hall."

"My God!" I whispered in horror.

"But that's not the worst," Carse cried as he grabbed my arm. "When I awakened the next morning it was late and the shrieks of the newsboys stabbed into my ears. They were yelling about a cruel, brutal murder which had been committed sometime during the night. I swung my feet off the bed to arise, when my eyes fell upon the diary which rested on my night-table. It was open to the confession of Number One as if I had been reading it in my sleep. There was a strange and terrifying dread in my soul as my feet struck the floor. I felt something wet and sticky touch my toes; then I looked down. It was a woman's head staring up at me.

"The room was smeared with blood from one end to the other, and there was a gore-caked knife resting beside the head, and a crimson towel lay across my bedpost. But there wasn't a drop of blood on my hands!

"I couldn't even attempt to explain it. I only knew that a woman h^d been murdered and that her severed head was in my bedroom. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't force myself into the belief that I was the murderer, and I stood stunned with the weird horror of knowing that Emil Drukker's Number One had been re-enacted and that I had played his own role. Where could I turn? Whom could I ask for advice? If I was mad they would commit me to an asylum; if I was not mad they would hang me.

"I carried the head to the cellar and buried it; then I cleaned up the blood and burned the towel. In my wardrobe I found a suit of clothes smeared with fresh blood. I found my shoes and hat splattered with it, and then I found my discarded gloves stained a violent crimson, with each finger stiffened as the blood had coagulated about it. No wonder there wasn't any blood on my hands!

"I went over the house from top to bottom and eradicated every stain that might be evidence against me; then I sat down with the diary in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other. I compared the two crimes. They were identical, even to the burying of the heads. Emil Drukker had done exactly the same as I had done: he carried the head in a towel, he left it in his room overnight, he buried it in his cellar, and he cleaned up the blood the following morning. But there was one ghastly difference: Emil Drukker had committed his crime with full purposeful foreknowledge, whereas I had committed my crime under hypnotic inducement!

"There is no other answer for what has happened in these last six weeks. I have racked my brain to find another solution, but there is none. I am being hypnotized by some unexplainable force, and once each week I come under the power of this evil which directs and commands my being. Last night I went to bed with the full knowledge of what would occur during the night. That is why I locked you in your room. This morning when I awakened I found the head exactly where the other five had lain; then I carried it to the basement and buried it. I cleaned up the blood and burned the towel.

"If you are numbed with horror, try to imagine how I feel about it. Six crimes in six weeks! And I can only thank merciful God that it will end with only one more. Perhaps it is ended now. That German servant who loaned me the diary said it would be only six or seven."

"Do you think the police will believe all of this?" I demanded. "What you have told me has no sane explanation. It—it's demonism!"

CARSE smiled pitiably. "There are more things in heaven and earth," he began; then he heaved his shoulders as if flinging off an attempt at levity. "The human mind is a strange organ, and no man can explain its mysteries. I have seen too much of atavism to ridicule any theories. There is nothing we can do but wait and hope that the German servant's prediction is true. Six or seven. *Six*—or *seven?*"

"Do you mean you expect me to grant you leniency?" I exclaimed. "Great heavens, Carse, there have been six horrible murders! Society demands a reckoning."

"I have atoned enough for ten times six!" he cried. "Have you no soul in you? The crimes will stop now. The German said they would, and everything else he predicted has come true. As my lifelong friend it is your duty to see me through."

"But those six——"

"No man can bring them back to life, but I am still a living man and you must save me. I shall divide my estate among the families of the six, and I swear to you that I shall never open a book on criminology again. You must do it—you must!"

"Do you honestly believe it is over?" I asked hoarsely.

"I do; with all my heart and soul, I do!"

"But you would say that anyway," I cried. "Suppose there is a Number Seven? The blood will be upon my hands as well as yours. It is an awful responsibility, Carse. There must be no more." "There won't be. I swear there won't be!"

He threw himself at me in an hysterical outburst of emotion. He tried to smile through the tears in his eyes, but the sight was so awful that I turned my head.

"I am still unconvinced," I said grimly. "The possibility of Number Seven is too important to overlook. Let me see Drukker's diary."

"Why?" he backed away and stared at me. "Why do you want to read the diary?"

"I want to read account Number Seven."

Carse came forward again and grabbed my arm. He shook it. "What good will that do?" he asked anxiously, "if there are only six of them? Besides, it's not a book you ought to read."

"Give me the diary!" I demanded again.

He scowled at me for a moment; then, shrugging, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a small leather-bound book. It was well worn, as if by many thumbs, and in faded gold letters across the cover were the words: Personal Diary of Emil Drukker, J. U. D.

"Sit down," I commanded. "And try to keep your nerves together. I shall do everything I can for you."

He backed away and dropped into a chair, his eyes fastened upon me in a look of almost majestic joy. And yet there was an undertone in his expression which I could not define. There was defiance there and fear. One of his hands rested on the near-by table, less

than two feet from the hilt of the butcher knife, and the fingers of that hand twitched nervously.

WITH an odd sense of uneasiness I flicked open the first several pages of the book and skimmed through the contents. My German was poor, yet I was able to understand the significance of what Emil Drukker had written in his large, scrawling hand. I read the first six accounts, then stared at Carse in amazement. His six crimes and Drukker's first six were so identical they might have been conscious reproductions. In all cases the victims were the same sex, the same age, and were in the same general walk of life. I then turned to account Number Seven and after reading a few wretched lines I gasped with horror: *it was a seven-year-old girl!*

Carse was on his feet, his jaw grim and determined. He stared fiercely at me, waiting my response.

"Carse," I muttered dazedly, "it—it——"

"You can't back out," he cried as he stepped toward me. "There will be no seven, I tell you. It's ended on six. I swear it to you!"

"No," I said, "I cannot permit such a risk. Did you read account Number Seven? He not only cut off the head, but he dismembered——"

"You can't back out!" he screamed as he shook my arm. "You can't, you can't!"

"But Carse, this is a girl—a mere child. Don't you realize it would be unpardonable even for you? No, I can never take such a risk. I must turn you over to the police."

Carse slapped me viciously, then stumbled back against the table. His face was a mask of suffused blood, his eyes wild with desperation.

"Damn you!" he cried savagely. "You are no friend; you're a cheat, a betrayer!"

Suddenly his groping fingers touched the butcher knife and he drew himself taut. His fingers wound around the hilt like slowly moving worms. For a moment there was scarcely a breath between us; then he lifted his arm and brought the knife slowly out before him. I watched, horror-stricken, unable to lift my feet from the floor. A numbing paralysis of fright seemed to come over me.

"Carse, Carse!" I muttered.

He didn't hear me; his body was tensed for the deadly spring that would bring him down upon my throat. I saw a ripple of galvanizing energy race through his hands; then I managed an outcry. At the same instant he was in the air.

THERE is no need for me to relate the events which followed; for the newspapers had assiduously described the capture and arrest of Carse, and his subsequent history, brief as it was, has become public property. To my dying day I shall carry the five-inch scar along my cheek where his knife descended upon me, and I can never cease to be thankful for that one outburst of absolute fear which tore from my lips and attracted a passing policeman; otherwise I might have been Number Seven in the grim line of epitaphs that marked the close of this fantastic case. Only by bludgeoning Carse with his stick could the officer overcome him, and it was necessary to keep him in a straitjacket until the hour of his execution.

It is a curious fact that the psychiatrists who examined Carse, several of them his former pupils, could not find him unbalanced enough to be irresponsible for his crimes. Those long and tiring vigils in the mental clinic will haunt me for life; there was no end to their searching and probing of his subconscious mind, no end to the tests and questions, the examinations and analyses which ended hopelessly against him. But even if they had found him insane, violently and homicidally insane, they would not have dared report such a finding to the court. Society demanded a death in return for a death, and Jason Carse was nailed to his coffin at the first moment of his arrest. Had he been spared the gallows by the court, he would not have been spared the gallows by the mobs that milled about the detention prison; for continually throughout the trial was the grim reminder that society represented by mobs has not yet forgotten the use of lynch law.

Carse's death put a definite end to the head-hunting crimes in this city, and for the first time in over six weeks the metropolitan area has been able to breathe freely. I have lost a faithful and sincere friend; but I lost him, not on the gallows, but three months ago when he first discovered the diary of Emil Drukker.

It is the diary, not my mourning, which has prompted me to pen this account of my knowledge of the head-hunting crimes. During the trial, as you may remember, I sought to introduce the diary as major evidence in support of Carse's somnambulistic manias, but it was waived out of court with ridicule and contempt.

One must admit that Carse's story as he told it to me, and as I later reiterated it to the court, was fantastic and highly improbable. But there are certain irrefutable arguments in support of Carse's story which shed a terrible light, not alone upon the case, but on all criminal cases of similar nature. For one thing, a hypnotic examination by competent state alienists was completely unsuccessful in the attempt to bring forth his subconscious knowledge of any of the six murders. Secondly, Carse was unable, despite his most intense and willing efforts, to reconstruct even the smallest part of any one of the crimes. His only acquaintance with his own alleged activities was brought to him in *dreams*.

A further significant fact, which the court ignored as irrelevant, was the ghastly identity of Carse's supposed crimes and those confessed by Emil Drukker. It is impossible that this duality of murders could be brought about by mere coincidence, for the similarity of detail was carried too far. This fact alone presupposes the statement that there was a horrible and unnatural bondage between Emil Drukker and Jason Carse—the bondage of the diary!

One night of each week for six weeks Jason Carse was compelled by some unknown power to dream about a murder confessed and described in Drukker's diary. On each of these nights, while Carse watched it in a dream, an identical murder was committed somewhere in the city and the man whom he recognized as the murderer was Emil Drukker. It was as if Carse's dreams, projected into reality by the sheer vividness of the diary, had resurrected Emil Drukker from his grave and set him free to re-enact his former crimes!

I am mad, you will say; but I speak of demonism and not law. How else can you explain the duality of these murders? How else can you explain Carse's ignorance of the crimes? How else can you explain those brutal dreams, the fruit of whose reality Carse found each morning on the floor beside his bed? Nor is it enough to stop alone with this question. How many men besides Jason Carse have spent sleepless nights over the diary of Emil Drukker?

The newspapers will answer that question each time they are opened; in Paris the police discover a headless body lying along the wharves, and the murderer is still unknown; in Berlin a college professor kills himself upon the discovery of a human head lying near his bed with his own hunting-knife stuck to the hilt into its brain; in Stockholm the police discover the bodies of two women lying in an empty house—their heads have not yet been found; and in Cleveland, one of our greatest cities, is reported the discovery of the tenth headless corpse in a series of murders that has gripped the city in terror. What kind of person commits such crimes? And why do the missing heads turn up years later in the basement of a house owned by a mild-appearing and docile old man?

Jason Carse was not the first man to pay with his life for crimes such as these, nor is he the last. It is well to beware of sickish-smelling trunks that are left in deserted houses, and I caution the reader against stepping on misshapen bundles of clothing which he may rind half hidden in a clump of bushes.

For the diary of Emil Drukker is missing from the drawer where I left it, and I have been told that a strange, Germanic-looking man was seen prowling about the house just before its disappearance.

THE MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN

LEON KAUFMAN WAS no longer new to the city. The Palace of Delights, he'd always called it, in the days of his innocence. But that was when he'd lived in Atlanta, and New York was still a kind of promised land, where anything and everything was possible.

Now Kaufman had lived three and a half months in his dream-city, and the Palace of Delights seemed less than delightful.

Was it really only a season since he stepped out of Port Authority Bus Station and looked up 42nd Street towards the Broadway intersection? So short a time to lose so many treasured illusions.

He was embarrassed now even to think of his naivety. It made him wince to remember how he had stood and announced aloud:

'New York, I love you.'

Love? Never.

It had been at best an infatuation.

And now, after only three months living with his object of adoration, spending his days and nights in her presence, she had lost her aura of perfection.

New York was just a city.

He had seen her wake in the morning like a slut, and pick murdered men from between her teeth, and suicides from the tangles of her hair. He had seen her late at night, her dirty back streets shamelessly courting depravity. He had watched

her in the hot afternoon, sluggish and ugly, indifferent to the atrocities that were being committed every hour in her throttled passages.

It was no Palace of Delights.

It bred death, not pleasure.

Everyone he met had brushed with violence; it was a fact of life. It was almost chic to have known someone who had died a violent death. It was proof of living in that city.

But Kaufman had loved New York from afar for almost twenty years. He'd planned his love affair for most of his adult life. It was not easy, therefore, to shake the passion off, as though he had never felt it. There were still times, very early, before the cop-sirens began, or at twilight, when Manhattan was still a miracle.

For those moments, and for the sake of his dreams, he still gave her the benefit of the doubt, even when her behaviour was less than ladylike.

She didn't make such forgiveness easy. In the few months that Kaufman had lived in New York her streets had been awash with spilt blood.

In fact, it was not so much the streets themselves, but the tunnels beneath those streets.

'Subway Slaughter' was the catch-phrase of the month. Only the previous week another three killings had been reported. The bodies had been discovered in one of the subway cars on the AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, hacked open and partially disembowelled, as though an efficient abattoir operative had been interrupted in his work. The killings were so thoroughly professional that the police were interviewing every man on their records who had some past

connection with the butchery trade. The meat-packaging plants on the water-front were being watched, the slaughter-houses scoured for clues. A swift arrest was promised, though none was made.

This recent trio of corpses was not the first to be discovered in such a state; the very day that Kaufman had arrived a story had broken in The Times that was still the talk of every morbid secretary in the office.

The story went that a German visitor, lost in the subway system late at night, had come across a body in a train. The victim was a well-built, attractive thirty-year-old woman from Brooklyn. She had been completely stripped. Every shred of clothing, every article of jewellery. Even the studs in her ears.

More bizarre than the stripping was the neat and systematic way in which the clothes had been folded and placed in individual plastic bags on the seat beside the corpse.

This was no irrational slasher at work. This was a highly-organized mind: a lunatic with a strong sense of tidiness.

Further, and yet more bizarre than the careful stripping of the corpse, was the outrage that had then been perpetrated upon it. The reports claimed, though the Police Department failed to confirm this, that the body had been meticulously shaved. Every hair had been removed: from the head, from the groin, from beneath the arms; all cut and scorched back to the flesh. Even the eyebrows and eyelashes had been plucked out.

Finally, this all too naked slab had been hung by the feet from one of the holding handles set in the roof of the car, and a black plastic bucket, lined with a black plastic bag,

had been placed beneath the corpse to catch the steady fall of blood from its wounds.
In that state, stripped, shaved, suspended and practically bled white, the body of Loretta Dyer had been found.

It was disgusting, it was meticulous, and it was deeply confusing.

There had been no rape, nor any sign of torture. The woman had been swiftly and efficiently dispatched as though she was a piece of meat. And the butcher was still loose.

The City Fathers, in their wisdom, declared a complete close-down on press reports of the slaughter. It was said that the man who had found the body was in protective custody in New Jersey, out of sight of enquiring journalists. But the cover-up had failed. Some greedy cop had leaked the salient details to a reporter from The Times. Everyone in New York now knew the horrible story of the slaughters. It was a topic of conversation in every Deli and bar; and, of course, on the subway.

But Loretta Dyer was only the first.

Now three more bodies had been found in identical circumstances; though the work had clearly been interrupted on this occasion. Not all the bodies had been shaved, and the jugulars had not been severed to bleed them. There was another, more significant difference in the discovery: it was not a tourist who had stumbled on the sight, it was a reporter from The New York Times.

Kaufman surveyed the report that sprawled across the front page of the newspaper. He had no prurient interest in the story, unlike his elbow mate along the counter of the Deli. All he felt was a mild disgust, that made him push his

plate of over-cooked eggs aside. It was simply further proof of his city's decadence. He could take no pleasure in her sickness.

Nevertheless, being human, he could not entirely ignore the gory details on the page in front of him. The article was unsensationally written, but the simple clarity of the style made the subject seem more appalling. He couldn't help wondering, too, about the man behind the atrocities. Was there one psychotic loose, or several, each inspired to copy the original murder? Perhaps this was only the beginning of the horror. Maybe more murders would follow, until at last the murderer, in his exhilaration or exhaustion, would step beyond caution and be taken. Until then the city, Kaufman's adored city, would live in a state somewhere between hysteria and ecstasy.

At his elbow a bearded man knocked over Kaufman's coffee.

'Shit!' he said.

Kaufman shifted on his stool to avoid the dribble of coffee running off the counter.

'Shit,' the man said again.

No harm done,' said Kaufman.

He looked at the man with a slightly disdainful expression on his face. The clumsy bastard was attempting to soak up the coffee with a napkin, which was turning to mush as he did so.

Kaufman found himself wondering if this oaf, with his florid cheeks and his uncultivated beard, was capable of murder. Was there any sign on that over-fed face, any clue in the shape of his head or the turn of his small eyes that gave his true nature away?

The man spoke.

‘Wannanother?’

Kaufman shook his head.

‘Coffee. Regular. Dark,’ the oaf said to the girl behind the counter. She looked up from cleaning the grill of cold fat.

‘Huh?’

‘Coffee. You deaf?’

The man grinned at Kaufman.

‘Deaf,’ he said.

Kaufman noticed he had three teeth missing from his lower jaw.

‘Looks bad, huh?’ he said.

What did he mean? The coffee? The absence of his teeth?

‘Three people like that. Carved up.’ Kaufman nodded.

‘Makes you think,’ he said. ‘Sure.’

‘I mean, it’s a cover-up isn’t it? They know who did it.’

This conversation’s ridiculous, thought Kaufman. He took off his spectacles and pocketed them: the bearded face was no longer in focus. That was some improvement at least.

‘Bastards,’ he said. ‘Fucking bastards, all of them. I’ll lay you anything it’s a cover-up.’

‘Of what?’

‘They got the evidence: they’re just keeping us in the fucking dark. There’s something out there that’s not human.’

Kaufman understood. It was a conspiracy theory the oaf was trotting out. He’d heard them so often; a panacea.

‘See, they do all this cloning stuff and it gets out of hand.

They could be growing fucking monsters for all we know.

There’s something down there they won’t tell us about.

Cover-up, like I say. Lay you anything.’ Kaufman found the man’s certainty attractive. Monsters, on the prowl. Six

heads: a dozen eyes. Why not?

He knew why not. Because that excused his city: that let her off the hook. And Kaufman believed in his heart that the monsters to be found in the tunnels were perfectly human.

The bearded man threw his money on the counter and got up, sliding his fat bottom off the stained plastic stool.

'Probably a fucking cop,' he said, as his parting shot. 'Tried to make a fucking hero, made a fucking monster instead.' He grinned grotesquely. 'Lay you anything,' he continued and lumbered out without another word.

Kaufman slowly exhaled through his nose, feeling the tension in his body abate.

He hated that sort of confrontation: it made him feel tongue-tied and ineffectual. Come to think of it, he hated that kind of man: the opinionated brute that New York bred so well.

It was coming up to six when Mahogany woke. The morning rain had turned into a light drizzle by twilight. The air was about as clear-smelling as it ever got in Manhattan. He stretched on his bed, threw off the dirty blanket and got up for work.

In the bathroom the rain was dripping on the box of the air-conditioner, filling the apartment with a rhythmical slapping sound. Mahogany turned on the television to cover the noise, uninterested in anything it had to offer.

He went to the window. The street six floors below was thick with traffic and people.

After a hard day's work New York was on its way home: to play, to make love. People were streaming out of their offices and into their automobiles. Some would be testy after

a day's sweaty labour in a badly-aired office; others, benign as sheep, would be wandering home down the Avenues, ushered along by a ceaseless current of bodies. Still others would even now be cramming on to the subway, blind to the graffiti on every wall, deaf to the babble of their own voices, and to the cold thunder of the tunnels.

It pleased Mahogany to think of that. He was, after all, not one of the common herd. He could stand at his window and look down on a thousand heads below him, and know he was a chosen man.

He had deadlines to meet, of course, like the people in the street. But his work was not their senseless labour, it was more like a sacred duty.

He needed to live, and sleep, and shit like them, too. But it was not financial necessity that drove him, but the demands of history.

He was in a great tradition, that stretched further back than America. He was a night-stalker: like Jack the Ripper, like Gilles de Rais, a living embodiment of death, a wraith with a human face. He was a haunter of sleep, and an awakener of terrors.

The people below him could not know his face; nor would care to look twice at him. But his stare caught them, and weighed them up, selecting only the ripest from the passing parade, choosing only the healthy and the young to fall under his sanctified knife.

Sometimes Mahogany longed to announce his identity to the world, but he had responsibilities and they bore on him heavily. He couldn't expect fame. His was a secret life, and it was merely pride that longed for recognition.

After all, he thought, does the beef salute the butcher as it throbs to its knees?

All in all, he was content. To be part of that great tradition was enough, would always have to remain enough.

Recently, however, there had been discoveries. They weren't his fault of course. Nobody could possibly blame him. But it was a bad time. Life was not as easy as it had been ten years ago. He was that much older, of course, and that made the job more exhausting; and more and more the obligations weighed on his shoulders. He was a chosen man, and that was a difficult privilege to live with.

He wondered, now and then, if it wasn't time to think about training a younger man for his duties. There would need to be consultations with the Fathers, but sooner or later a replacement would have to be found, and it would be, he felt, a criminal waste of his experience not to take on an apprentice.

There were so many felicities he could pass on. The tricks of his extraordinary trade. The best way to stalk, to cut, to strip, to bleed. The best meat for the purpose. The simplest way to dispose of the remains. So much detail, so much accumulated expertise.

Mahogany wandered into the bathroom and turned on the shower. As he stepped in he looked down at his body. The small paunch, the greying hairs on his sagging chest, the scars, and pimples that littered his pale skin. He was getting old. Still, tonight, like every other night, he had a job to do.

Kaufman hurried back into the lobby with his sandwich, turning down his collar and brushing rain off his hair. The clock above the elevator read seven-sixteen. He would work

through until ten, no later.

The elevator took him up to the twelfth floor and to the Pappas offices. He traipsed unhappily through the maze of empty desks and hooded machines to his little territory, which was still illuminated. The women who cleaned the offices were chatting down the corridor: otherwise the place was lifeless.

He took off his coat, shook the rain off it as best he could, and hung it up.

Then he sat down in front of the piles of orders he had been tussling with for the best part of three days, and began work. It would only take one more night's labour, he felt sure, to break the back of the job, and he found it easier to concentrate without the incessant clatter of typists and typewriters on every side.

He unwrapped his ham on whole-wheat with extra mayonnaise and settled in for the evening.

It was nine now.

Mahogany was dressed for the nightshift. He had his usual sober suit on, with his brown tie neatly knotted, his silver cufflinks (a gift from his first wife) placed in the sleeves of his immaculately pressed shirt, his thinning hair gleaming with oil, his nails snipped and polished, his face flushed with cologne.

His bag was packed. The towels, the instruments, his chain-mail apron.

He checked his appearance in the mirror. He could, he thought, still be taken for a man of forty-five, fifty at the outside.

As he surveyed his face he reminded himself of his duty.

Above all, he must be careful. There would be eyes on him every step of the way, watching his performance tonight, and judging it. He must walk out like an innocent, arousing no suspicion.

If they only knew, he thought. The people who walked, ran and skipped past him on the streets: who collided with him without apology: who met his gaze with contempt:

who smiled at his bulk, looking uneasy in his ill-fitting suit. If only they knew what he did, what he was and what he carried.

Caution, he said to himself, and turned off the light. The apartment was dark. He went to the door and opened it, used to walking in blackness. Happy in it.

The rain clouds had cleared entirely. Mahogany made his way down Amsterdam towards the Subway at 145th Street. Tonight he'd take the AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS again, his favourite line, and often the most productive.

Down the Subway steps, token in hand. Through the automatic gates. The smell of the tunnels was in his nostrils now. Not the smell of the deep tunnels of course. They had a scent all of their own. But there was reassurance even in the stale electric air of this shallow line. The regurgitated breath of a million travellers circulated in this warren, mingling with the breath of creatures far older; things with voices soft like clay, whose appetites were abominable. How he loved it. The scent, the dark, the thunder.

He stood on the platform and scanned his fellow-travellers critically. There were one or two bodies he contemplated following, but there was so much dross amongst them: so few worth the chase. The physically wasted, the obese, the ill, the weary. Bodies destroyed by

excess and by indifference. As a professional it sickened him, though he understood the weakness that spoiled the best of men.

He lingered in the station for over an hour, wandering between platforms while the trains came and went, came and went, and the people with them. There was so little of quality around it was dispiriting. It seemed he had to wait longer and longer every day to find flesh worthy of use.

It was now almost half past ten and he had not seen a single creature who was really ideal for slaughter.
No matter, he told himself, there was time yet. Very soon the theatre crowd would be emerging. They were always good for a sturdy body or two. The well-fed intelligentsia, clutching their ticket-stubs and opining on the diversions of art — oh yes, there'd be something there.

If not, and there were nights when it seemed he would never find something suitable, he'd have to ride downtown and corner a couple of lovers out late, or find an athlete or two, fresh from one of the gyms. They were always sure to offer good material, except that with such healthy specimens there was always the risk of resistance.

He remembered catching two black bucks a year ago or more, with maybe forty years between them, father and son perhaps. They'd resisted with knives, and he'd been hospitalised for six weeks. It had been a close fought encounter and one that had set him doubting his skills. Worse, it had made him wonder what his masters would have done with him had he suffered a fatal injury. Would he have been delivered to his family in New Jersey, and given a decent Christian burial? Or would his carcass have been thrown into the dark, for their own use?

The headline of the New York Post, discarded on the seat across from him caught Mahogany's eye: 'Police All-Out to Catch Killer'. He couldn't resist a smile. Thoughts of failure, weakness and death evaporated. After all, he was that man, that killer, and tonight the thought of capture was laughable. After all, wasn't his career sanctioned by the highest possible authorities? No policeman could hold him, no court pass judgement on him. The very forces of law and order that made such a show of his pursuit served his masters no less than he; he almost wished some two-bit cop would catch him, take him in triumph before the judge, just to see the looks on their faces when the word came up from the dark that Mahogany was a protected man, above every law on the statute books.

It was now well after ten-thirty. The trickle of theatre-goers had begun, but there was nothing likely so far. He'd want to let the rush pass anyway: just follow one or two choice pieces to the end of the line. He bided his time, like any wise hunter.

Kaufman was not finished by eleven, an hour after he'd promised himself release. But exasperation and ennui were making the job more difficult, and the sheets of figures were beginning to blur in front of him. At ten past eleven he threw down his pen and admitted defeat. He rubbed his hot eyes with the cushions of his palms till his head filled with colours.

'Fuck it,' he said.

He never swore in company. But once in a while to say fuck it to himself was a great consolation. He made his way out

of the office, damp coat over his arm, and headed for the elevator. His limbs felt drugged and his eyes would scarcely stay open.

It was colder outside than he had anticipated, and the air brought him out of his lethargy a little. He walked towards the Subway at 34th Street. Catch an Express to Far Rockaway. Home in an hour.

Neither Kaufman nor Mahogany knew it, but at 96th and Broadway the Police had arrested what they took to be the Subway Killer, having trapped him in one of the up-town trains. A small man of European extraction, wielding a hammer and a saw, had cornered a young woman in the second car and threatened to cut her in half in the name of Jehovah.

Whether he was capable of fulfilling his threat was doubtful. As it was, he didn't get the chance. While the rest of the passengers (including two Marines) looked on, the intended victim landed a kick to the man's testicles. He dropped the hammer. She picked it up and broke his lower jaw and right cheek-bone with it before the Marines stepped in.

When the train halted at 96th the Police were waiting to arrest the Subway Butcher. They rushed the car in a horde, yelling like banshees and scared as shit. The Butcher was lying in one corner of the car with his face in pieces. They carted him away, triumphant. The woman, after questioning, went home with the Marines.

It was to be a useful diversion, though Mahogany couldn't know it at the time. It took the Police the best part of the night to determine the identity of their prisoner,

chiefly because he couldn't do more than drool through his shattered jaw. It wasn't until three-thirty in the morning that one Captain Davis, coming on duty, recognized the man as a retired flower salesman from the Bronx called Hank Vasarely. Hank, it seemed, was regularly arrested for threatening behaviour and indecent exposure, all in the name of Jehovah. Appearances deceived: he was about as dangerous as the Easter Bunny. This was not the Subway Slaughterer. But by the time the cops had worked that out, Mahogany had been about his business a long while.

It was eleven-fifteen when Kaufman got on the Express through to Mott Avenue. He shared the car with two other travellers. One was a middle-aged black woman in a purple coat, the other a pale, acne-ridden adolescent who was staring at the 'Kiss My White Ass' graffiti on the ceiling with spaced-out eyes.

Kaufman was in the first car. He had a journey of thirty-five minutes' duration ahead of him. He let his eyes slide closed, reassured by the rhythmical rocking of the train. It was a tedious journey and he was tired. He didn't see Mahogany's face, either, staring through the door between the cars, looking through for some more meat.

At 14th Street the black woman got out. Nobody got in. Kaufman opened his eyes briefly, taking in the empty platform at 14th, then shut them again. The doors hissed closed. He was drifting in that warm somewhere between awareness and sleep and there was a fluttering of nascent dreams in his head. It was a good feeling. The train was off again, rattling down into the tunnels.

Maybe, at the back of his dozing mind, Kaufman half-

registered that the doors between the second and first cars had been slid open. Maybe he smelt the sudden gush of tunnel-air, and registered that the noise of wheels was momentarily louder. But he chose to ignore it.

Maybe he even heard the scuffle as Mahogany subdued the youth with the spaced-out stare. But the sound was too distant and the promise of sleep was too tempting. He drowsed on.

For some reason his dreams were of his mother's kitchen. She was chopping turnips and smiling sweetly as she chopped. He was only small in his dream and was looking up at her radiant face while she worked. Chop. Chop. Chop.

His eyes jerked open. His mother vanished. The car was empty and the youth was gone.

How long had he been dozing? He hadn't remembered the train stopping at West 4th Street. He got up, his head full of slumber, and almost fell over as the train rocked violently. It seemed to have gathered quite a substantial head of speed. Maybe the driver was keen to be home, wrapped up in bed with his wife. They were going at a fair lick; in fact it was bloody terrifying.

There was a blind drawn down over the window between the cars which hadn't been down before as he remembered. A little concern crept into Kaufman's sober head. Suppose he'd been sleeping a long while, and the guard had overlooked him in the car. Perhaps they'd passed Far Rockaway and the train was now speeding on its way to wherever they took the trains for the night.

'Fuck it,' he said aloud.

Should he go forward and ask the driver? It was such a bloody idiot question to ask: where am I? At this time of

night was he likely to get more than a stream of abuse by way of reply?

Then the train began to slow.

A station. Yes, a station. The train emerged from the tunnel and into the dirty light of the station at West 4th Street. He'd missed no stops…

So where had the boy gone?

He'd either ignored the warning on the car wall forbidding transfer between the cars while in transit, or else he'd gone into the driver's cabin up front. Probably between the driver's legs even now, Kaufman thought, his lip curling. It wasn't unheard of. This was the Palace of Delights, after all, and everyone had their right to a little love in the dark.

Kaufman shrugged to himself. What did he care where the boy had gone?

The doors closed. Nobody had boarded the train. It shunted off from the station, the lights flickering as it used a surge of power to pick up some speed again.

Kaufman felt the desire for sleep come over him afresh, but the sudden fear of being lost had pumped adrenalin into his system, and his limbs were tingling with nervous energy.

His senses were sharpened too.

Even over the clatter and the rumble of the wheels on the tracks, he heard the sound of tearing cloth coming from the next car. Was someone tearing their shirt off?

He stood up, grasping one of the straps for balance.

The window between the cars was completely curtained off, but he stared at it, frowning, as though he might suddenly discover X-ray vision. The car rocked and rolled. It was really travelling again.

Another ripping sound.

Was it rape?

With no more than a mild voyeuristic urge he moved down the see-sawing car towards the intersecting door, hoping there might be a chink in the curtain. His eyes were still fixed on the window, and he failed to notice the splatters of blood he was treading in. Until —

— his heel slipped. He looked down. His stomach almost saw the blood before his brain and the ham on whole-wheat was half-way up his gullet catching in the back of his throat. Blood. He took several large gulps of stale air and looked away — back at the window. His head was saying: blood. Nothing would make the word go away.

There was no more than a yard or two between him and the door now. He had to look. There was blood on his shoe, and a thin trail to the next car, but he still had to look.

He had to.

He took two more steps to the door and scanned the curtain looking for a flaw in the blind: a pulled thread in the weave would be sufficient. There was a tiny hole. He glued his eye to it.

His mind refused to accept what his eyes were seeing beyond the door. It rejected the spectacle as preposterous, as a dreamed sight. His reason said it couldn't be real, but his flesh knew it was. His body became rigid with terror. His eyes, unblinking, could not close off the appalling scene through the curtain. He stayed at the door while the train rattled on, while his blood drained from his extremities, and his brain reeled from lack of oxygen. Bright spots of light flashed in front of his vision, blotting out the atrocity.

Then he fainted.

He was unconscious when the train reached Jay Street. He was deaf to the driver's announcement that all travellers beyond that station would have to change trains. Had he heard this he would have questioned the sense of it. No trains disgorged all their passengers at Jay Street; the line ran to Mott Avenue, via the Aqueduct Race Track, past JFK Airport. He would have asked what kind of train this could be. Except that he already knew. The truth was hanging in the next car. It was smiling contentedly to itself from behind a bloody chain-mail apron.

This was the Midnight Meat Train.

There's no accounting for time in a dead faint. It could have been seconds or hours that passed before Kaufman's eyes flickered open again, and his mind focussed on his new-found situation.

He lay under one of the seats now, sprawled along the vibrating wall of the car, hidden from view. Fate was with him so far he thought: somehow the rocking of the car must have jockeyed his unconscious body out of sight.

He thought of the horror in Car Two, and swallowed back vomit. He was alone. Wherever the guard was (murdered perhaps), there was no way he could call for help. And the driver? Was he dead at his controls? Was the train even now hurtling through an unknown tunnel, a tunnel without a single station to identify it, towards its destruction?

And if there was no crash to be killed in, there was always the Butcher, still hacking away a door's thickness from where Kaufman lay.

Whichever way he turned, the name on the door was Death.

The noise was deafening, especially lying on the floor. Kaufman's teeth were shaking in their sockets and his face felt numb with the vibration; even his skull was aching.

Gradually he felt strength seeping back into his exhausted limbs. He cautiously stretched his fingers and clenched his fists, to set the blood flowing there again.

And as the feeling returned, so did the nausea. He kept seeing the grisly brutality of the next car. He'd seen photographs of murder victims before, of course, but these were no common murders. He was in the same train as the Subway Butcher, the monster who strung his victims up by the feet from the straps, hairless and naked.

How long would it be before the killer stepped through that door and claimed him? He was sure that if the slaughterer didn't finish him, expectation would.

He heard movement beyond the door.

Instinct took over. Kaufman thrust himself further under the seat and tucked himself up into a tiny ball, with his sick-white face to the wall. Then he covered his head with his hands and closed his eyes as tightly as any child in terror of the Bogeyman.

The door was slid open. Click. Whoosh. A rush of air up from the rails. It smelt stranger than any Kaufman had smelt before: and colder. This was somehow primal air in his nostrils, hostile and unfathomable air. It made him shudder.

The door closed. Click.

The Butcher was close, Kaufman knew it. He could be standing no more than a matter of inches from where he lay.

Was he even now looking down at Kaufman's back? Even now bending, knife in hand, to scoop Kaufman out of

his hiding place, like a snail hooked from its shell?

Nothing happened. He felt no breath on his neck. His spine was not slit open.

There was simply a clatter of feet close to Kaufman's head; then that same sound receding.

Kaufman's breath, held in his lungs 'til they hurt, was expelled in a rasp between his teeth.

Mahogany was almost disappointed that the sleeping man had alighted at West 4th Street. He was hoping for one more job to do that night, to keep him occupied while they descended. But no: the man had gone. The potential victim hadn't looked that healthy anyway, he thought to himself, he was an anaemic Jewish accountant probably. The meat wouldn't have been of any quality. Mahogany walked the length of the car to the driver's cabin. He'd spend the rest of the journey there.

My Christ, thought Kaufman, he's going to kill the driver.

He heard the cabin door open. Then the voice of the Butcher: low and hoarse.

'Hi.'

'Hi.'

They knew each other.

'All done?'

'All done.'

Kaufman was shocked by the banality of the exchange. All done? What did that mean: all done?

He missed the next few words as the train hit a particularly noisy section of track.

Kaufman could resist looking no longer. Warily he uncurled himself and glanced over his shoulder down the

length of the car. All he could see was the Butcher's legs, and the bottom of the open cabin door. Damn. He wanted to see the monster's face again.

There was laughter now.

Kaufman calculated the risks of his situation: the mathematics of panic. If he remained where he was, sooner or later the Butcher would glance down at him, and he'd be mincemeat. On the other hand, if he were to move from his hiding place he would risk being seen and pursued. Which was worse: stasis, and meeting his death trapped in a hole; or making a break for it and confronting his Maker in the middle of the car?

Kaufman surprised himself with his mettle: he'd move.

Infinitesimally slowly he crawled out from under the seat, watching the Butcher's back every minute as he did so. Once out, he began to crawl towards the door. Each step he took was a torment, but the Butcher seemed far too engrossed in his conversation to turn round.

Kaufman had reached the door. He began to stand up, trying all the while to prepare himself for the sight he would meet in Car Two. The handle was grasped; and he slid the door open.

The noise of the rails increased, and a wave of dank air, stinking of nothing on earth, came up at him. Surely the Butcher must hear, or smell? Surely he must turn —But no. Kaufman skinned his way through the slit he had opened and so through into the bloody chamber beyond.

Relief made him careless. He failed to latch the door properly behind him and it began to slide open with the buffeting of the train.

Mahogany put his head out of the cabin and stared down the car towards the door.
‘What the fuck’s that?’ said the driver.
‘Didn’t close the door properly. That’s all.’
Kaufman heard the Butcher walking towards the door. He crouched, a ball of consternation, against the intersecting wall, suddenly aware of how full his bowels were. The door was pulled closed from the other side, and the footsteps receded again.

Safe, for another breath at least.

Kaufman opened his eyes, steeling himself for the slaughter-pen in front of him.

There was no avoiding it.

It filled every one of his senses: the smell of opened entrails, the sight of the bodies, the feel of fluid on the floor under his fingers, the sound of the straps creaking beneath the weight of the corpses, even the air, tasting salty with blood. He was with death absolutely in that cubby-hole, hurtling through the dark.

But there was no nausea now. There was no feeling left but a casual revulsion. He even found himself peering at the bodies with some curiosity.

The carcass closest to him was the remains of the pimply youth he’d seen in Car One. The body hung upside-down, swinging back and forth to the rhythm of the train, in unison with its three fellows; an obscene dance macabre.

Its arms dangled loosely from the shoulder joints, into which gashes an inch or two deep had been made, so the bodies would hang more neatly.

Every part of the dead kid’s anatomy was swaying

hypnotically. The tongue, hanging from the open mouth. The head, lolling on its slit neck. Even the youth's penis flapped from side to side on his plucked groin. The head wound and the open jugular still pulsed blood into a black bucket. There was an elegance about the whole sight: the sign of a job well-done.

Beyond that body were the strung-up corpses of two young white women and a darker skinned male. Kaufman turned his head on one side to look at their faces. They were quite blank. One of the girls was a beauty. He decided the male had been Puerto Rican. All were shorn of their head and body hair. In fact the air was still pungent with the smell of the shearing. Kaufman slid up the wall out of the crouching position, and as he did so one of the women's bodies turned around, presenting a dorsal view.

He was not prepared for this last horror.

The meat of her back had been entirely cleft open from neck to buttock and the muscle had been peeled back to expose the glistening vertebrae. It was the final triumph of the Butcher's craft. Here they hung, these shaved, bled, slit slabs of humanity, opened up like fish, and ripe for devouring.

Kaufman almost smiled at the perfection of its horror. He felt an offer of insanity tickling the base of his skull, tempting him into oblivion, promising a blank indifference to the world.

He began to shake, uncontrollably. He felt his vocal cords trying to form a scream. It was intolerable: and yet to scream was to become in a short while like the creatures in front of him.

'Fuck it,' he said, more loudly than he'd intended, then

pushing himself off from the wall he began to walk down the car between the swaying corpses, observing the neat piles of clothes and belongings that sat on the seats beside their owners. Under his feet the floor was sticky with drying bile. Even with his eyes closed to cracks he could see the blood in the buckets too clearly: it was thick and heady, flecks of grit turning in it.

He was past the youth now and he could see the door into Car Three ahead. All he had to do was run this gauntlet of atrocities. He urged himself on, trying to ignore the horrors, and concentrate on the door that would lead him back into sanity.

He was past the first woman. A few more yards, he said to himself, ten steps at most, less if he walked with confidence.

Then the lights went out.

'Jesus Christ,' he said.

The train lurched, and Kaufman lost his balance.

In the utter blackness he reached out for support and his flailing arms encompassed the body beside him. Before he could prevent himself he felt his hands sinking into the lukewarm flesh, and his fingers grasping the open edge of muscle on the dead woman's back, his fingertips touching the bone of her spine. His cheek was laid against the bald flesh of the thigh.

He screamed; and even as he screamed, the lights flickered back on.

And as they flickered back on, and his scream died, he heard the noise of the Butcher's feet approaching down the length of Car One towards the intervening door.

He let go of the body he was embracing. His face was

smeared with blood from her leg. He could feel it on his cheek, like war paint.

The scream had cleared Kaufman's head and he suddenly felt released into a kind of strength. There would be no pursuit down the train, he knew that: there would be no cowardice, not now. This was going to be a primitive confrontation, two human beings, face to face. And there would be no trick — none — that he couldn't contemplate using to bring his enemy down. This was a matter of survival, pure and simple.

The door-handle rattled.

Kaufman looked around for a weapon, his eye steady and calculating. His gaze fell on the pile of clothes beside the Puerto Rican's body. There was a knife there, lying amongst the rhinestone rings and the imitation gold chains. A long-bladed, immaculately clean weapon, probably the man's pride and joy. Reaching past the well-muscled body, Kaufman plucked the knife from the heap. It felt good in his hand; in fact it felt positively thrilling.

The door was opening, and the face of the slaughterer came into view.

Kaufman looked down the abattoir at Mahogany. He was not terribly fearsome, just another balding, overweight man of fifty. His face was heavy and his eyes deep-set. His mouth was rather small and delicately lipped. In fact he had a woman's mouth.

Mahogany could not understand where this intruder had appeared from, but he was aware that it was another over-sight, another sign of increasing incompetence. He must dispatch this ragged creature immediately. After all they could not be more than a mile or two from the end of the

line. He must cut the little man down and have him hanging up by his heels before they reached their destination.

He moved into Car Two.

'You were asleep,' he said, recognizing Kaufman. 'I saw you.

Kaufman said nothing.

'You should have left the train. What were you trying to do? Hide from me?'

Kaufman still kept his silence.

Mahogany grasped the hand of the cleaver hanging from his well-used leather belt. It was dirty with blood, as was his chain-mail apron, his hammer and his saw.

'As it is,' he said, 'I'll have to do away with you.'

Kaufman raised the knife. It looked a little small beside the Butcher's paraphernalia.

'Fuck it,' he said.

Mahogany grinned at the little man's pretensions to defence.

'You shouldn't have seen this: it's not for the likes of you,' he said, taking another step towards Kaufman. 'It's secret.'

Oh, so he's the divinely-inspired type is he? thought Kaufman. That explains something.

'Fuck it,' he said again.

The Butcher frowned. He didn't like the little man's indifference to his work, to his reputation.

'We all have to die some time,' he said. 'You should be well pleased: you're not going to be burnt up like most of them: I can use you. To feed the fathers.'

Kaufman's only response was a grin. He was past being terrorized by this gross, shambling hulk.

The Butcher unhooked the cleaver from his belt and brandished it.

‘A dirty little Jew like you,’ he said, ‘should be thankful to be useful at all: meat’s the best you can aspire to.’

Without warning, the Butcher swung. The cleaver divided the air at some speed, but Kaufman stepped back. The cleaver sliced his coat-arm and buried itself in the Puerto Rican’s shank. The impact half-severed the leg and the weight of the body opened the gash even further. The exposed meat of the thigh was like prime steak, succulent and appetizing. The Butcher started to drag the cleaver out of the wound, and in that moment Kaufman sprang. The knife sped towards Mahogany’s eye, but an error of judgement buried it instead in his neck. It transfixed the column and appeared in a little gout of gore on the other side. Straight through. In one stroke. Straight through.

Mahogany felt the blade in his neck as a choking sensation, almost as though he had caught a chicken bone in his throat. He made a ridiculous, half-hearted coughing sound. Blood issued from his lips, painting them, like lipstick on his woman’s mouth. The cleaver clattered to the floor.

Kaufman pulled out the knife. The two wounds spouted little arcs of blood.

Mahogany collapsed to his knees, staring at the knife that had killed him. The little man was watching him quite passively. He was saying something, but Mahogany’s ears were deaf to the remarks, as though he was under water.

Mahogany suddenly went blind. He knew with a nostalgia for his senses that he would not see or hear again. This was death: it was on him for certain.

His hands still felt the weave of his trousers, however, and the hot splashes on his skin. His life seemed to totter on its tiptoes while his fingers grasped at one last sense.

Then his body collapsed, and his hands, and his life, and his sacred duty folded up under a weight of grey flesh.

The Butcher was dead.

Kaufman dragged gulps of stale air into his lungs and grabbed one of the straps to steady his reeling body. Tears blotted out the shambles he stood in. A time passed: he didn't know how long; he was lost in a dream of victory.

Then the train began to slow. He felt and heard the brakes being applied. The hanging bodies lurched forward as the careering train slowed, its wheels squealing on rails that were sweating slime. Curiosity overtook Kaufman. Would the train shunt into the Butcher's underground slaughterhouse, decorated with the meats he had gathered through his career? And the laughing driver, so indifferent to the massacre, what would he do once the train had stopped? Whatever happened now was academic. He could face anything at all; watch and see.

The tannoy crackled. The voice of the driver:

'We're here man. Better take your place eh?'

Take your place? What did that mean?

The train had slowed to a snail's pace. Outside the windows, everything was as dark as ever. The lights flickered, then went out. This time they didn't come back on.

Kaufman was left in total darkness.

'We'll be out in half-an-hour,' the tannoy announced, so like any station report.

The train had come to a stop. The sound of its wheels on

the tracks, the rush of its passage, which Kaufman had grown so used to, were suddenly absent. All he could hear was the hum of the tannoy. He could still see nothing at all.

Then, a hiss. The doors were opening. A smell entered the car, a smell so caustic that Kaufman clapped his hand over his face to shut it out.

He stood in silence, hand to mouth, for what seemed a lifetime. See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil.

Then, there was a flicker of light outside the window. It threw the door frame into silhouette, and it grew stronger by degrees. Soon there was sufficient light in the car for Kaufman to see the crumpled body of the Butcher at his feet, and the sallow sides of meat hanging on every side of him.

There was a whisper too, from the dark outside the train, a gathering of tiny noises like the voices of beetles. In the tunnel, shuffling towards the train, were human beings. Kaufman could see their outlines now. Some of them carried torches, which burned with a dead brown light. The noise was perhaps their feet on the damp earth, or perhaps their tongues clicking, or both.

Kaufman wasn't as naive as he'd been an hour before. Could there be any doubt as to the intention these things had, coming out of the blackness towards the train? The Butcher had slaughtered the men and women as meat for these cannibals, they were coming, like diners at the dinner-gong, to eat in this restaurant car.

Kaufman bent down and picked up the cleaver the Butcher had dropped. The noise of the creatures' approach was louder every moment. He backed down the car away from the open doors, only to find that the doors behind him were also open, and there was the whisper of approach there

too.

He shrank back against one of the seats, and was about to take refuge under them when a hand, thin and frail to the point of transparency appeared around the door.

He could not look away. Not that terror froze him as it had at the window. He simply wanted to watch.

The creature stepped into the car. The torches behind it threw its face into shadow, but its outline could be clearly seen.

There was nothing very remarkable about it.

It had two arms and two legs as he did; its head was not abnormally shaped. The body was small, and the effort of climbing into the train made its breath coarse. It seemed more geriatric than psychotic; generations of fictional man-eaters had not prepared him for its distressing vulnerability.

Behind it, similar creatures were appearing out of the darkness, shuffling into the train. In fact they were coming in at every door. Kaufman was trapped. He weighed the cleaver in his hands, getting the balance of it, ready for the battle with these antique monsters. A torch had been brought into the car, and it illuminated the faces of the leaders.

They were completely bald. The tired flesh of their faces was pulled tight over their skulls, so that it shone with tension. There were stains of decay and disease on their skin, and in places the muscle had withered to a black pus, through which the bone of cheek or temple was showing. Some of them were naked as babies, their pulpy, syphilitic bodies scarcely sexed. What had been breasts were leathery bags hanging off the torso, the genitalia shrunken away.

Worse sights than the naked amongst them were those who wore a veil of clothes. It soon dawned on Kaufman that

the rotting fabric slung around their shoulders, or knotted about their midriffs was made of human skins. Not one, but a dozen or more, heaped haphazardly on top of each other, like pathetic trophies.

The leaders of this grotesque meal-line had reached the bodies now, and the gracile hands were laid upon the shanks of meat, and were running up and down the shaved flesh in a manner that suggested sensual pleasure. Tongues were dancing out of mouths, flecks of spittle landing on the meat. The eyes of the monsters were flickering back and forth with hunger and excitement.

Eventually one of them saw Kaufman.

Its eyes stopped flickering for a moment, and fixed on him. A look of enquiry came over the face, making a parody of puzzlement.

'You,' it said. The voice was as wasted as the lips it came from.

Kaufman raised the cleaver a little, calculating his chances. There were perhaps thirty of them in the car and many more outside. But they looked so weak, and they had no weapons, but their skin and bones. The monster spoke again, its voice quite well modulated, when it found itself, the piping of a once-cultured, once-charming man.

'You came after the other, yes?'

It glanced down at the body of Mahogany. It had clearly taken in the situation very quickly.

'Old anyway,' it said, its watery eyes back on Kaufman, studying him with care.

'Fuck you,' said Kaufman.

The creature attempted a wry smile, but it had almost forgotten the technique and the result was a grimace which

exposed a mouthful of teeth that had been systematically filed into points.

‘You must now do this for us,’ it said through the bestial grin.

‘We cannot survive without food.’

The hand patted the rump of human flesh. Kaufman had no reply to the idea. He just stared in disgust as the fingernails slid between the cleft in the buttocks, feeling the swell of tender muscle.

‘It disgusts us no less than you,’ said the creature. ‘But we’re bound to eat this meat, or we die. God knows, I have no appetite for it.’

The thing was drooling nevertheless.

Kaufman found his voice. It was small, more with a confusion of feelings than with fear.

‘What are you?’ He remembered the bearded man in the Deli.

‘Are you accidents of some kind?’

‘We are the City fathers,’ the thing said. ‘And mothers, and daughters and sons. The builders, the law-makers. We made this city.’

‘New York?’ said Kaufman. The Palace of Delights?

‘Before you were born, before anyone living was born.’ As it spoke the creature’s fingernails were running up under the skin of the split body, and were peeling the thin elastic layer off the luscious brawn. Behind Kaufman, the other creatures had begun to unhook the bodies from the straps, their hands laid in that same delighting manner on the smooth breasts and flanks of flesh. These too had begun skinning the meat.

‘You will bring us more,’ the father said. ‘More meat for us. The other one was weak.’

Kaufman stared in disbelief.

‘Me?’ he said. ‘Feed you? What do you think I am?’

‘You must do it for us, and for those older than us. For those born before the city was thought of, when America was a timberland and desert.’

The fragile hand gestured out of the train.

Kaufman’s gaze followed the pointing finger into the gloom. There was something else outside the train which he’d failed to see before; much bigger than anything human.

The pack of creatures parted to let Kaufman through so that he could inspect more closely whatever it was that stood outside, but his feet would not move.

‘Go on,’ said the father.

Kaufman thought of the city he’d loved. Were these really its ancients, its philosophers, its creators? He had to believe it. Perhaps there were people on the surface — bureaucrats, politicians, authorities of every kind — who knew this horrible secret and whose lives were dedicated to preserving these abominations, feeding them, as savages feed lambs to their gods. There was a horrible familiarity about this ritual. It rang a bell — not in Kaufman’s conscious mind, but in his deeper, older self.

His feet, no longer obeying his mind, but his instinct to worship, moved. He walked through the corridor of bodies and stepped out of the train.

The light of the torches scarcely began to illuminate the limitless darkness outside. The air seemed solid, it was so thick with the smell of ancient earth. But Kaufman smelt nothing. His head bowed, it was all he could do to prevent himself from fainting again.

It was there; the precursor of man. The original Ameri-

can, whose homeland this was before Passamaquoddy or Cheyenne. Its eyes, if it had eyes, were on him.

His body shook. His teeth chattered.

He could hear the noise of its anatomy: ticking, crackling, sobbing.

It shifted a little in the dark.

The sound of its movement was awesome. Like a mountain sitting up.

Kaufman's face was raised to it, and without thinking about what he was doing or why, he fell to his knees in the shit in front of the Father of Fathers.

Every day of his life had been leading to this day, every moment quickening to this incalculable moment of holy terror.

Had there been sufficient light in that pit to see the whole, perhaps his tepid heart would have burst. As it was he felt it flutter in his chest as he saw what he saw.

It was a giant. Without head or limb. Without a feature that was analogous to human, without an organ that made sense, or senses. If it was like anything, it was like a shoal of fish. A thousand snouts all moving in unison, budding, blossoming and withering rhythmically. It was iridescent, like mother of pearl, but it was sometimes deeper than any colour Kaufman knew, or could put a name to.

That was all Kaufman could see, and it was more than he wanted to see. There was much more in the darkness, flickering and flapping.

But he could look no longer. He turned away, and as he did so a football was pitched out of the train and rolled to a halt in front of the Father.

At least he thought it was a football, until he peered more

attentively at it, and recognized it as a human head, the head of the Butcher. The skin of the face had been peeled off in strips. It glistened with blood as it lay in front of its Lord.

Kaufman looked away, and walked back to the train. Every part of his body seemed to be weeping but his eyes. They were too hot with the sight behind him, they boiled his tears away.

Inside, the creatures had already set about their supper. One, he saw, was plucking the blue sweet morsel of a woman's eye out of the socket. Another had a hand in its mouth. At Kaufman's feet lay the Butcher's headless corpse, still bleeding profusely from where its neck had been bitten through.

The little father who had spoken earlier stood in front of Kaufman.

'Serve us?' it asked, gently, as you might ask a cow to follow you.

Kaufman was staring at the cleaver, the Butcher's symbol of office. The creatures were leaving the car now, dragging the half-eaten bodies after them. As the torches were taken out of the car, darkness was returning.

But before the lights had completely disappeared the father reached out and took hold of Kaufman's face, thrusting him round to look at himself in the filthy glass of the car window.

It was a thin reflection, but Kaufman could see quite well enough how changed he was. Whiter than any living man should be, covered in grime and blood.

The father's hand still gripped Kaufman's face, and its forefinger hooked into his mouth and down his gullet, the nail scoring the back of his throat. Kaufman gagged on the

intruder, but had no will left to repel the attack.

‘Serve,’ said the creature. ‘In silence.’

Too late, Kaufman realized the intention of the fingers.

Suddenly his tongue was seized tight and twisted on the root. Kaufman, in shock, dropped the cleaver. He tried to scream, but no sound came. Blood was in his throat, he heard his flesh tearing, and agonies convulsed him.

Then the hand was out of his mouth and the scarlet, spittle-covered fingers were in front of his face, with his tongue, held between thumb and forefinger.

Kaufman was speechless.

‘Serve,’ said the father, and stuffed the tongue into his own mouth, chewing on it with evident satisfaction. Kaufman fell to his knees, spewing up his sandwich.

The father was already shuffling away into the dark; the rest of the ancients had disappeared into their warren for another night.

The tannoy crackled.

‘Home,’ said the driver.

The doors hissed closed and the sound of power surged through the train. The lights flickered on, then off again, then on.

The train began to move.

Kaufman lay on the floor, tears pouring down his face, tears of discomfiture and of resignation. He would bleed to death, he decided, where he lay. It wouldn’t matter if he died. It was a foul world anyway.

The driver woke him. He opened his eyes. The face that was looking down at him was black, and not unfriendly. It

grinned. Kaufman tried to say something, but his mouth was sealed up with dried blood. He jerked his head around like a driveller trying to spit out a word. Nothing came but grunts.

He wasn't dead. He hadn't bled to death.

The driver pulled him to his knees, talking to him as though he were a three-year-old.

'You got a job to do, my man: they're very pleased with you.'

The driver had licked his fingers, and was rubbing Kaufman's swollen lips, trying to part them.

'Lots to learn before tomorrow night. . .'

Lots to learn. Lots to learn.

He led Kaufman out of the train. They were in no station he had ever seen before. It was white-tiled and absolutely pristine; a station-keeper's Nirvana. No graffiti disfigured the walls. There were no token-booths, but then there were no gates and no passengers either. This was a line that provided only one service: The Meat Train.

A morning shift of cleaners were already busy hosing the blood off the seats and the floor of the train. Somebody was stripping the Butcher's body, in preparation for dispatch to New Jersey. All around Kaufman people were at work.

A rain of dawn light was pouring through a grating in the roof of the station. Motes of dust hung in the beams, turning over and over. Kaufman watched them, entranced. He hadn't seen such a beautiful thing since he was a child. Lovely dust. Over and over, and over and over.

The driver had managed to separate Kaufman's lips. His mouth was too wounded for him to move it, but at least he could breathe easily. And the pain was already beginning to subside.

The driver smiled at him, then turned to the rest of the workers in the station.

'I'd like to introduce Mahogany's replacement. Our new butcher,' he announced.

The workers looked at Kaufman. There was a certain deference in their faces, which he found appealing.

Kaufman looked up at the sunlight, now falling all around him. He jerked his head, signifying that he wanted to go up, into the open air. The driver nodded, and led him up a steep flight of steps and through an alley-way and so out on to the sidewalk.

It was a beautiful day. The bright sky over New York was streaked with filaments of pale pink cloud, and the air smelt of morning.

The Streets and Avenues were practically empty. At a distance an occasional cab crossed an intersection, its engine a whisper; a runner sweated past on the other side of the street.

Very soon these same deserted sidewalks would be thronged with people. The city would go about its business in ignorance: never knowing what it was built upon, or what it owed its life to. Without hesitation, Kaufman fell to his knees and kissed the dirty concrete with his bloody lips, silently swearing his eternal loyalty to its continuance.

The Palace of Delights received the adoration without comment.